Mundane Madness

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Mundane Madness

by det395

Summary

After a traumatizing experience, Will decides that maybe he deserves a shot at a normal, healthy life.

It just might be nice to have Hannibal at his side too.

Notes

This story starts around the time of Rôti (Abel Gideon fiasco) and includes some bits of that episode as well as the next, before veering off course.

Enjoy!

See the end of the work for more notes

Chapter 1

"Splat. Four people, at the same exact time, falling to their deaths. They watched the precipice open before them and then could do nothing as they were pushed over the ledge."

Will gestures toward the ground and the flowing red pattern of the carpet blurs in his vision slightly. He walks on promptly, circling his chair, and wonders if the dizziness is another mysterious symptom or if his lack of sleep really is catching up to him.

"A coworker's grievance?" Hannibal asks.

Will scrunches up his face and shakes his head.

"This doesn't feel personal, let alone professional. This is more."

"What does it feel like to push people off of a building?"

"Out of the building. Right through the windows."

Will paces back on his heel quickly. It was a disturbing scene to see, inside of a tent put up to shield the eyes of any innocent passerby from the crime scene. The shelter trapped in the smell of the body parts that were mashed into the cracks of the sidewalk. It was different from death by a blade or a gun. This was physics doing its job, not a brush stroke but a whack against the canvas.

And the actual crime scene was 300 feet away. The victims were tied to a contraption that sent them out of the window the moment someone opened the door to save them, and the victims hit the sidewalk at almost 50 miles an hour.

“The image of the powerful executive jumping from skyscrapers is memorialized in the American mind as a feature of major recessions. Fail the world, fail the family,” Hannibal says.

“I’d say that’s more than just a failure.”

“Blame that cannot be hidden so easily anymore, then.”

“It’s always brushed under the rug one way or another.” Will smooths out the tassels on Hannibal’s rug with his toe.

“Is there someone you blame for where you are now?”

“Not *someone.* I conquered social mobility as much as I needed to. All it took was a scholarship and some fake confidence. Doesn’t mean I can’t be bitter.”

“Yet here you are burdening yourself, what have you conquered if you have no control?”

“I’m not burdening myself, murderers are burdening me. Catching them lessens the load.”

“Perhaps you could say no for a change.”

“It would build up worse. It’s a conundrum. If I was fixing boat motors I’d have a boss too, and I’d have a lot less benefits.”

Hannibal sighs almost imperceptibly. Will recognizes that slight lowering of his shoulders by now. “How were victims weighed down?”

“In such a way that they mangled their legs first, but enough to kill. Eventually.”

“They did not fly, they dropped. This was no shaming, though.”

“Why do you say that?” Will asks.

“Why at night? Why not a spectacle of rush hour? Or lunch?”

“There *was* shame. Just not… public.”

“Shame for the victims.”

Will chuckles, spinning on his feet again. “If the motive is as simple as bad business it will be a welcome break from the madness.”

“But you don’t think it is.”

Will looks at the ground and shakes his head. This serial killer feels tiring to think about. So much effort to smash the windows and bind the victims, only to see them fall for a handful of seconds. It feels angry and bitter, cruel even in its distance between perpetrator and victim. Crueller, maybe. There’s no intimacy when watching from a distance.

On the carpet where he stares, something wet and dark begins to seep through. It’s red, highlighting the colours that are already there. It spreads, obscuring the fabric design.

Will lifts his head quickly, enough sanity left in him to recognize what’s real or not, and jumps at the figure right at his side. It catches his shoulder.

“Will?”

He looks back to Hannibal's chair, where he was only a second ago.

"Sorry?"

"You went quiet and began swaying, I worried you would fall."

"Ah. Lost in thought." His head is pounding, too. He backs up but Hannibal grasps him more firmly.

"Come. If you're insistent on this case and this conversation, we can do it in a place where I can ensure you're getting nutrients in your body. Unless you think you can convince me you've been eating well today?"

Will follows hesitantly, trying to think of an excuse, but Hannibal is already grabbing his coat and flicking off the light switch.

"You'd rather we talk about something else?" Will asks, following close behind.

"Your work is part of you. It lets me see the world in the way it bounces around your skull. But you are not your work. I want to talk about you, and if you're waiting until there are no murderers to finally turn your brain back on yourself then we may be sitting across from each other until the end of the world."

Will walks past Hannibal's outstretched arm.

"If I didn't talk about the cases I reckon our sessions would be a lot more boring for you. Isn't it fun to hear of the wackiest nutjobs on the coast?"

"The Will Graham I know would not end up anywhere else but the fringe of this madness and murder. I have seen 'whacky nutjobs' before, it is the filter through your mind that interests me, on a personal level."

“Not professional? And here I thought you might be getting ready for my death to publish all those articles about my mysterious psyche.”

Hannibal’s hand settles on his back to gently push him out into the cold air so he can lock up.

“I have enough topics to write about. And while life is beautiful in its inability to predict, I’m not anticipating your death anytime soon.”

“I don’t know, many more serial killers under my skin and one might just stick a knife much deeper.”

They slow as they approach their vehicles. His car looks like a piece of trash with its bumper pulled up close to Hannibal’s Bentley, intruding on its well-earned space. The thought is more amusing than embarrassing.

“You have the armour. And a few knives of your own for anyone who gets too close,” Hannibal says.

“I don’t know if an unstable guy like me should be running with knives. I’ll take the armour.” He turns to face Hannibal when they reach the curb.

Hannibal squeezes his arm. “Will I find you behind me as I go home?”

Will nods hesitantly, averting his eyes.

“Feels like less of a therapy appointment at your home,” Will says.

“I believe we never decided on our line between therapy and conversations.”

“Perhaps it’s an issue with our definitions. If these are conversations, they’re pretty one-sided conversations. You should let me ask more of the questions.”

Hannibal tilts his head slightly. “Is it my turn to worry about being psychoanalyzed?”

“I reckon you deserve it.” Will twists on the spot to stare down the busy street. He imagines what it would be like to see someone crack like an egg against the sidewalk. Not just the gruesome aftermath that he already saw, but the *impact*. Would a person bounce, or would they simply splat against the ground, dead weight? Would the crack of bones dominate all other noises?

“You have an understanding of me in your mind already. Delving in deeper may challenge that image that you have depended on so far,” Hannibal says, leaning toward Will’s gaze to centre his attention again.

“What is friendship but learning about the embarrassing things a person has done to shatter their dignity?”

“How do you think I embarrass myself?”

“You might have the grace to brush things off but there’s always something. Especially underneath the people who seem most put together.” Will looks him up and down. It’s meant to be mocking but Hannibal stares at him for long enough that Will wonders if he’s crossed a line. He waits until finally, Hannibal smiles.

“So long as you can keep my secrets. Clearly, I have an image to maintain.”

“I already have kept your secrets,” Will says with a frown.

“You have.” He grins. “And Abigail is lucky to have you.”

Will nods. The image of Abigail with bloody hands returns to him. Nicholas Boyle frozen in the ground. So frozen that he might shatter if dropped from a height.

“I hope you feel more confident in our decision when we see her tomorrow. Our dear Alana Bloom says Abigail is feeling much better. Her happiness is worth it all, isn’t it?”

“Of course, yes.”

“Now, I’ll see you shortly, Will.”

He watches Hannibal step away to his car and waits a moment before following. A few weeks ago he would have turned around and gone home immediately. These days, only nightmares await. A fresh meal might do him good.

The nightmares do come. They come after wine and circling conversation, after the assurances of his soberness and his lonely drive home in the dark. They come after he watches his dogs swarm the front yard, illuminated by comforting yellow light from the house. He feels better than he has in a long time, and yet the nightmares still come when he lays his head down on his pillow.

He tries to grasp onto something, but his entire world is suddenly untethered, his mattress gone from beneath him. It’s not the falling that is scary, though. It’s the anticipation of the bottom that makes him scream. He wakes up feeling like he’s dropped right into a puddle of his own sweat.

It’s still dark out so he stands up and turns on all of the lights in his house. He zips up his coat, pulls on his toque, and steps off of his porch with his hands buried in his pockets. He waits until he reaches the line of the trees before turning around. The warm light emanating from his house is softened by the fog, and the edges of the roof blur into the night sky until he can imagine the sail in its place. After only a moment he can practically hear the rolling of the waves and smell the fresh saltiness thick in the air. A light flashes through the woods and

across his line of vision, probably nothing more than a car rolling past, but in his mind's eye, he decides to believe the mirage and see the lighthouse beckoning his little boat on the sea to land, if he so desires to follow it. He holds onto that little ball of safety until the sky begins to lighten and ruin the fantasy.

He strips his clothes on the way to the shower when he walks inside. He can wash away the dried sweat but he can't wash away the anxiety buzzing under his skin. He doesn't want to lose time now. He doesn't want to miss lunch with Abigail. He doesn't want to be the man no one can depend on solely because his brain seems to be melting out of his ears.

He manages to distract himself a bit by playing with the newest addition to his pack: a mutt with a symmetrical pattern of red fur and giant paws that tease the size she'll be eventually. She was found by one of his neighbours' daughters when she walked upon a litter of puppies hidden in the empty engine of an old car. Most of the puppies hadn't survived the cold. If Will had to guess, he'd say someone's dog got pregnant and the owner didn't want to deal with the pressure of caring for them.

Miraculously, this puppy was still kicking, kept warm at the bottom of the dogpile, and Will decided he'd honour the name that the poor child gave her after stumbling upon such a sad sight, *Lucky*. It *is* lucky that even Will and his most trusted veterinarians could nurse her back to this strength.

Lucky nibbles on his hand with a little growl and Will scolds her gently. He tosses a little toy instead and the puppy jumps and misses.

She's going to be a great dog and it'll be easy to find a home for her. And he *will* give her away, he repeats to himself. He keeps the ugly and old and bad-tempered dogs that no one wants. He already made some questionable exceptions, but eight dogs is far past excess. Lucky rolls on her back and he melts inside a little. It's hard to resist a puppy.

He puts her in a little homemade gated area in the corner of the living room with puppy pads for a floor. Winston can probably jump over the gate and give her company if he wants to. They're good together, which makes it harder to think about giving her away.

Will pulls up to the restaurant almost an hour before the reservation. He sits at a table in the corner with his laptop to grade and waits for everyone to arrive with comparably less worry

over losing time and ruining their plans. He buys a coffee each time the waitress glares at him for loitering until he's trembling with jitters.

He ignores how sick he feels. He just needs to last the afternoon without having another episode.

He packs his things up quickly when he sees Abigail's face at the glass door. Abigail meanders over to him, drifting sideways at the last second in a way that doesn't quite welcome a hug.

"I'm starting to think we should all make bets on whether Dr. Lecter will survive eating food from such a cheap restaurant. This isn't his kind of place, is it?" Abigail says in lieu of a greeting. Will shares a quick smile with Alana past her shoulder.

"My bets are on just his left eye starting to twitch," Will says.

"He's more humble than you guys may think," Alana says, ever gracious. "He may surprise you. He was very supportive of coming somewhere familiar."

"No home left but at least I have Mary's Diner and the fond memories of vomiting up a milkshake after soccer practice as a kid," Abigail says, crossing her arms.

Will smiles. He really does like her.

They sit on either side of Abigail at a round table after a waitress beckons them over. Will glances over at Alana. She looks more casual than usual, and as effortlessly pretty as always. He wants to check in about the protective custody from Abel Gideon but that could stress out Abigail to hear.

Hannibal strides in shortly after and greets them in a way that even has the waitress standing a little taller. He flattens his hand down the side of Abigail's head affectionately.

Hannibal flashes Will his own little smile. There are secrets in that smile. Secrets of blood and deception, of the teenage girl who seems so normal while she drinks soda and complains about group therapy, and only Will and Hannibal know that's not entirely true.

Only Alana is left in ignorance at this table. It feels kind of nice to have this shared knowledge. He does feel closer to Hannibal. Last night their conversation went off on a number of tangents and they felt more like friends than patient and psychiatrist for a while. Even though Will still prefers his solitude, last night was nice. It feels nice to be understood. Hannibal has a similar level and kind of intelligence as him and can always follow the direction of his brain, no matter how strange.

Will clears his throat and asks Abigail how she has been and he tries not to look sad as she recounts the routine of her days with bitterness. They all prod her with questions between ordering and waiting, trying to find something optimistic, but she seems quite down today.

"I really don't have many life updates right now, unless you want to hear about how weird the other girls are. Seriously, I feel like one of them is about to start stealing locks of my hair, or, like, eat my nail clippings."

"Is she bothering you?" Alana asks, worried.

Abigail shakes her head. "She just stares at me funny. I miss talking to normal people. But apparently I don't fit into that category."

"No such thing," Hannibal says. "And there is nothing wrong with being weird, but soon you will be able to socialize with whoever you would like."

Will catches Alana's annoyed side glance at Hannibal. No one knows how long Abigail will be in Port Haven.

"One day, of course," Alana says.

“If the FBI doesn’t try to lock me up,” Abigail says.

“Did Jack Crawford say something else?” Will asks.

Abigail laughs dryly. “He doesn’t believe I’m innocent.”

Alana rubs her shoulder and looks at her sympathetically.

“Jack is stubborn and pushy when he can’t find the answers he wants. There is no evidence, which means you’re safe, even from him,” Will says.

“Will is right, there’s nothing to worry about. Letting things pass is your best course,” Hannibal says. Will nods.

“Are you going to bring up the stupid book again?” she mumbles, slouching over the table slightly.

When her eyes flick up and meet Hannibal’s stern gaze back, she straightens her back. Will watches in mild surprise. That kind of authoritative energy doesn’t come naturally to him, not like it does for Hannibal. He briefly wonders if Hannibal has ever been a father. He reckons Hannibal is a bachelor solely for his own preference, considering his age and stability.

It’s just more difficult for Will with Abigail. Will wants to appease her, but he knows she needs adults in her life that can be strict with her, too. He’s nervous that if he acts too much like her father she’ll grow resentful of him. He hopes that with time she’ll accept him more, in whatever way she can, especially now that she knows he’s protecting her. He just wants to make things better for her.

“You already know I disapprove of the book, but I respect your decisions, Abigail, and I will continue to support you,” Hannibal says. Will wants to add on, but his head is starting to

pound worse. Will dabs at the sweat on his forehead in what he hopes is a discrete way. He's glad he took his aspirin not too long ago.

They all quiet down as the food arrives. Will watches with slight amusement as Hannibal cuts into his eggs and tilts his head appraisingly. He pokes the potatoes with a knife and then smells a bit of hollandaise sauce on the end of his fork. Before ordering, he had walked up to the kitchen and Will could just barely hear him asking questions about where all of the ingredients came from and how each meal was cooked. He wonders if Hannibal would make a scene by complaining, but Hannibal takes a bite and seems content, or at least appeased enough to fake it.

"I imagine these are the things you worry about every day. We should talk about lighter things now that you're out and about, give you a break. No book talk, no murder talk," Alana says.

Abigail picks at her pancakes. "Don't you all study murderers? Might be hard to avoid."

"We all need to separate life from the darker parts of our jobs," Alana says. She looks at Will with a soft, knowing smile, but it doesn't quite mitigate the quip at him that it is, gentle as she means it.

"Important to limit the murder and madness in life. Only a healthy amount," Will says, hoping the sarcasm isn't pushing things too far. He sees Abigail smile a bit and it feels like a success.

Will clears his throat. "For some nicer news, who wants to see the puppy I rescued?" He asks, digging into his front pocket for his phone. He figured out how to use the camera app because he thought Abigail would like to see. Thankfully, her face lights up, and Alana also lets out an excited noise. Will smiles as he gives them his phone to coo over.

"Her name is Lucky," he says. "I'll save you the sob story, but we are very lucky she was found when she was. She's great."

"She's so cute, oh my God," Abigail says.

“You can meet her one day if you’d like,” he says, a bit distracted. He can feel a line of sweat dripping down his forehead and doesn’t want to wipe his face with attention on him. He feels overly hot, and it’s hard to ignore.

“I sure wouldn’t say no to that.” She smiles at the phone.

Maybe if Abigail leaves the hospital in a few months he can give her Lucky. He can hold onto the puppy for a while longer and help Abigail care for her. The domestic fantasies alone fill him with warmth, as unlikely as they might be in reality.

His eyes trail to the side and he finds Hannibal looking at him. Will meets his concern with a weak smile.

And then he blinks and at his feet he sees the body of a teenage girl with mangled legs and a cracked skull, bleeding out on the sidewalk.

Chapter 2

Chapter Summary

> Will loses time while at lunch with Abigail and finds himself standing in front of a gruesome crime scene.

Will hurries away from the horrendous crime scene, trying to look at nothing but his feet, but Jack steps in his path before he can get too far.

“Will? That was fast. Are you okay?”

“I didn’t, uh,” Will squeezes his eyes shut against a stabbing headache right behind his eyes. He puts a hand over his face to block out the white winter sun.

“Will?”

“I didn’t look yet. Give me two seconds, I need to make a phone call.”

“A phone call? Will, you just got here, and forensics are waiting.”

“It’s Dr. Lecter I need to call, okay?” he says, his voice rising with panic, which at least convinces Jack to let him go. Will pats his coat pockets, thankfully finding his phone and his aspirin.

He turns to leave and catches sight of Beverly, Jimmy, and Brian looking at him. He slows his pace so he looks like less of a maniac but they already appear to be taken aback at his outburst. He averts his gaze and hurries down the street, avoiding eye contact with any police or press until he can get around the block.

He finds a quiet spot in an alley and dials the phone as he swallows back three aspirin dry. His head is pounding and he's broken out in a shivering cold sweat and he doesn't even know where he is or how he got here.

Relief floods him when Hannibal answers quickly.

"Hello, Will."

"I lost time again." Will wipes at his forehead and stutters for a moment trying to sort through the many questions he has.

"Are you safe right now?"

"I'm at a crime scene with Jack. I don't know where, though, or how I got here. I was still at lunch just a *minute* ago and then—"

"That is where you told us you were going not long ago at lunch. I assume your car is close by. That's how you left."

"I left you all at lunch? Was I okay?" His heart beats a bit faster.

"Yes. A bit quiet perhaps. I must say, I didn't notice you were that out of sorts, or else I would not have suggested you leave."

Will clenches his jaw and his vision blurs with frustrated tears. He doesn't know what to say. He missed so much of lunch.

"Damn. Why did this have to happen now?"

“This seems to be happening more and more frequently.”

“Yeah, no kidding. I really didn’t want it to interfere with lunch with Abigail.”

“I’m sorry, Will,” Hannibal says.

“Did I leave really early?” Will asks, wincing at the thought.

“No. We were all in agreement that you should finish your food first. Perhaps you were more amenable to our suggestion while you were under the weather.”

“No, no, good.” He sighs. “Abigail is more important to me than this job, than what Jack needs from me.”

“And she had a nice time. We all did. I will tell you about it when we meet next and fill your memory until it feels as though you were present the whole time. Even through this struggle, I believe you are the best support for Abigail, and there will be many more memories with her. In the meantime, we will continue to search for the reason for these mental disturbances. I won’t give up on you, Will.”

Will leans back against a building and hugs his arms close, nodding to no one.

“Thank you,” he whispers.

“Why don’t you come to mine this evening, I’ll cook for you and we can talk.”

“I gotta get home to my dogs.”

“Then I will bring food to you. I wouldn’t mind meeting this puppy, either.”

Will hesitates for a moment, wondering if Hannibal coming over would make him feel better, or if he would just be sick and weary. His head is still pounding away, and his house probably smells like dog piss. Will shakes his head even though Hannibal can't see.

"No, really, I need to rest. Thank you, though."

Hannibal is quiet for a moment and Will reckons he's either stewing in annoyance or trying to think of a better excuse. Eventually, he gives in. "Tell me when you're home at least," Hannibal says.

"I will. Ah, Jack's waiting for me, I'd better go figure out what's going on."

"Jack will keep pushing you if you let him."

"I want to catch this guy."

"You said Abigail was more important than this job. Isn't your own well-being important to be there for her?"

Will frowns. "I'll talk to you later, Dr. Lecter."

He lowers his phone and squeezes his eyes shut for a few seconds. He feels like shit, physically and emotionally untethered, and like he might collapse at any second.

He feels comparably calmer walking back to the crime scene but people still shoot him curious and concerned glances. He falters in his step as he reaches the crime scene that he has no memory of being introduced to. He turns back to where Jack is watching him expectantly.

“I’d like to run through some things with Beverly first if that’s alright. I work well with her.” He glances at her and is relieved to see her smile. She might still think he’s insane, but at least she’s honest enough to tell him that she does.

“Are you feeling alright, Will?” Jack leans closer to look at him straight on.

“I’m fine. This killer is just confusing me a bit.”

Jack beckons them along with a frown and Will brushes by the tarp that hides the crime scene from the public eye. He can tell it’s a busy part of town. It looks like they’re next to a hotel.

He winces, counting four bodies, two of which look very young.

“Did you really ask me in here to shoot some theories back and forth? We’ve never done that before,” Beverly says once they’re away from Jack.

“Do you remember the other day when I called you because I lost time?” He smiles a bit sadly. “Can you just tell me what’s going on here? I… got confused.”

She looks at him, concerned. “So you lied to Jack out there. You’re not fine.”

“I’m still trying to figure it out with my psychiatrist.”

“If you’re struggling that much, you need to tell Jack.”

“But I’m here now, so I might as well try to be of use. Please, Beverly?”

“What do you need from me?”

“Will you just fill me in on what happened?”

“Will you tell Jack how you’re feeling later?”

He nods. “I will.”

She sighs. “Okay. And you’re not leaving today without telling him that you’re struggling.”

“That’s fair,” he concedes, looking away.

“I mean, you can still trust me. I won’t be the person that snitches on you to the boss, but Will, this is the FBI.”

“I do trust you. You’ve always been honest with me.”

“And I’ll continue to, as long as you give me the same.”

He smiles at her, grateful.

“Okay, well I’ll give you the rundown?” She asks.

He nods encouragingly.

“Same MO as the last guy, but different victims. This was a family staying overnight on a layover before a trip to Mexico. You’d think we could see it coming and stop it the second time, at least scale the building and save them, but the maid walked into their room first and

they all fell to their deaths. It seems so simple to save them, but each time the police are just too late or too dumb. Okay, that part isn't the official report, but we all know it's true…."

Will stares solemnly at the dead teenagers beside their parents and wishes he had just left.

"The last ones were injected with Ketamine as a kind of anesthesia. It's possible it came from the street so it's harder to find a source. We'll see soon if the same method was used here. It still wasn't enough to knock them out, though, but it would have put them in a dissociative state."

He listens to Beverly for a while and then asks to be alone upstairs in the hotel room. He looks at the shattered window and the rope system that dangled the victims over the edge. He then walks all the way down to the ground level, steps outside, and sees the family falling to their deaths clearly in his mind.

Jack wanders over to his side and Will starts mumbling like a toy with its string pulled.

"Mid-level staff, a nuclear family on vacation, these are figures of normality, of a safe, happy life. Our killer wants to break that apart. He wants to tell these people that they're not flying, and he wants them to know they're going to crash and burn. He resents them. I don't know if he's jealous or just thinks he's found a life that is far more superior."

Jack sighs next to him. "How the hell do we narrow down his victim list then?"

"We don't. He'll be caught because he likes flair and drama and wants his views to be known."

"All of this means he's *going* to be known, we'll have to make citizens know what to look out for now so we can avoid this happening again."

Will nods. "Yeah. We gotta catch him fast."

“Lounds already called him the Sky-High Slayer. Why does she always seem to get in with the names?”

“Crass,” Will agrees quietly.

Jack sighs deeply. Will feels eyes on him and catches Beverly staring at him. She nods toward Jack without any subtlety.

“Hey, Jack… I gotta get out of here, I’m not feeling great today. I’ve been as much use to you as I can.”

Jack doesn’t look happy. “What do you need from us?”

“Nothing. I just need some more rest.”

“You need to tell me what I can do to help. We need you here. In one piece.”

Will nods.

“I hope to see you at the Bureau’s Christmas party, too. It’s important for optics.”

“Optics? You mean trying to prove to everyone that I’m stable? By, what, pretending to be sociable and eating hors d'oeuvres?”

“It helps. You don’t talk to many people so you don’t know the rumours that go around the more cases you crack. The rumours turn sour when envy comes into play. It can make a big difference to show some of the other agents that you’re just one of them. Show them that there’s no weight to you failing the screening.”

Will laughs dryly. “You really think it will help my case when they interact with me?”

“Hey, Katz will be there, same with Price and Zeller, and Bloom and Lecter were given honorary invitations. You’ll be fine. Let people see you out and about.” Jack puts a hand on his shoulder and Will resists the urge to shake it off.

“You’re not asking me, are you?”

“Go get some rest, Will.”

When he makes it home, he cleans up the mess from Lucky, sends all of the dogs outside, and heats up some leftovers before finally pouring himself an extra tall glass of whisky.

They’re right, he thinks. All of them, Hannibal, Abigail, Beverly. He is struggling. This job isn’t helping, and he doesn’t know how to balance that. He doesn’t have an answer for Jack. He just wants to stop feeling this way.

He could quit. He thinks that might be what Hannibal is pushing him to do, but Will doesn’t like having Abel Gideon, the Chesapeake Ripper, the Copycat, and this new killer out there as loose ends. Maybe he will retire for good when he catches them, if that ever happens. He could move to the coast with his dogs and his savings and do odd jobs for people and try to sustain himself with fishing and gardening. He would have to change his standard of living quite drastically, but he’s never needed all that much.

He sits on the front porch wrapped up in multiple coats and lets Lucky curl up on his lap, chin hanging down over the side of his thigh. The winter air feels nice on his burning forehead and the night is quiet. He’s more suited for a simple life, he thinks.

Even as a kid he wasn't particularly rambunctious, which might have been in part because of his lack of friends from moving so much. He spent a lot of time sitting next to his dad on the boat deck in a lawn chair that was sunk nearly to the ground. They never talked. Sitting there, he mirrored his dad as best he could, legs spread wide and fingers tapping in time to the radio whether or not he could even hear it over the wind. He probably looked silly, thinking back to his scrawny self next to his old man.

Every once in a while his dad would mutter, "Don't you have school? Don't stay up too late now," but Will never left before him and his dad never made him. His dad filled and refilled his own tumbler of whiskey, always putting so little golden liquid in the bottom that Will wondered why he bothered to push himself out of the chair each time.

He loved those nights. He loved the slight rocking of the boat and the insects that swarmed the lamp and the rise and fall of his dog's rib-bumpy chest. He loved being next to his dad and feeling such sweet and easy peace.

He rocks back and forth on the back legs of the chair, slow and steady like a current. He might not have ever been able to connect with his dad, but he sure felt safe next to him. Despite his barely-functional alcoholism and propensity to bouts of anger, Will still wanted to be just like his dad. He was the only person he had. Now Will feels disillusioned from all that, and just wants to be alone.

Sitting in the quiet of the night with a tumbler of whiskey makes him feel unsettlingly like he's *become* his father. Maybe it even happened when his father died, succumbing to a number of ailments halfway through Will's grad school and leaving Will with memories and unspoken sentiments. He should have at least a decade before he's acting like his old man. He's kind of always been this way, though, except he might not ever have a kid sitting next to him, or any family apart from these dogs.

He stops rocking when he remembers his promise to tell Hannibal he's home. He digs his phone out of his pocket.

He opts for a text, not in the mood to talk to anyone. He can't become codependent with his psychiatrist anyway, even though it seems like they've been migrating increasingly into friendship territory. It seems like, for whatever reason, Hannibal wants to be friends more than he wants to be Will's psychiatrist. He knows that Hannibal is fond of him, and he can

only guess it's for the same reason he likes Hannibal. They seem to understand each other. Hannibal might not share much about himself, but Will is sure he can figure him out.

Home safe, he sends. It sounds a bit throwaway on afterthought. He considers sending a 'thank you' message, but for what? Before too much time passes, he sticks out his arm and takes a picture of Lucky, making sure his face isn't in it. She sniffs the phone curiously. *Sorry I didn't let you meet my puppy today.*

It doesn't take long for his phone to buzz.

Good evening, Will. You will have to make it up for me sometime. I am glad you are home safe. Take care. Best, Hannibal.

He stares at the screen for a while. He first considered Hannibal nothing more than an invasive psychiatrist. It's surprising how quickly he changed into someone that could feel so safe.

A nice text and memories of his father aren't enough to keep him calm all night or distract him from how sick he feels. He needs to sleep. It doesn't seem to matter how much aspirin he takes anymore.

He stumbles to bed, finishing the last of his whiskey like it's medicine. That's a joke his dad would make, too. He curls up on a towel and pulls only a thin sheet up his shoulders. He considers letting a dog in his bed but he can't bring himself to when only night terrors and fever await him.

Chapter 3

He dreams he's in a wide, empty field at night. He's not even sure if there's grass below his feet or a sky above him, it's just darkness as far as he can see until the stag steps closer, snuffling and sending a fog of its breath into Will's face.

It turns to leave and Will realizes too late that he was supposed to follow. He runs in the direction but finds only darkness. He turns on the spot, looking for a glimpse of it, but finds himself all turned around and unsure of where it went. He wanders in the dark for a long while, his feet digging into cold, wet ground until finally, something grabs him from behind.

He freezes at the touch but nothing more happens. In fact, he could probably yank out of the grasp if he wanted to. It feels kind of nice; wide hands on his biceps, fingers twitching against his skin, warmth pressed to his back, solid and protective, and finally a breath against his nape that wraps around his neck in a fog. With it comes a rush of pleasure, filling his lungs with something bright and warm, fiery at his very core.

He closes his eyes, leans back, and then falls right through the mass. The floor ceases to exist before him and he wakes up with a gasp before he can figure out what would have broken his fall next.

Will's eyes dart back and forth over the ceiling until he realizes where he is. He huffs out three large breaths and then gulps past his dry throat as he loosens his grip on the sheet.

He rolls halfway out of bed, dragging himself through sweaty sheets to find the aspirin on his bedside table and the glass of water his past self graciously left him. He gulps it down and then curls up for another moment, squeezing his tired eyes shut. It was certainly not the *worst* dream he's ever had. Not particularly bad until the fall. There are remnants of the pleasure from the dream left in his skin, but he doesn't really want to think about that now.

He rolls out of bed and works hard to steady himself as he walks to the kitchen and busies his hands preparing the dogs' food. His dream flashes behind his eyelids every time he blinks and he cringes each time.

He flicks big spoons of dog food into the bowls with a bit more force than is necessary.

Zoe only eats off the floor these days, so he plops a little dog food right onto the tile in the corner of the kitchen. Ellie likes to eat next to her so that small bowl goes there, too. Buster needs privacy so his bowl gets pushed into the bathroom. Harley, Jack, and Max will eat anything anywhere so he balances their bowls over one arm and sets them outside on the porch where he won't have to worry about cleaning up the slobber. He keeps Winston and Lucky near the kitchen once the other, less familiar dogs are distracted. He leans against the counter and sighs deeply.

He *knows* the hands in the dream belonged to Hannibal. He knew it the second they grabbed him. Even if he couldn't see him, and has never felt him in that way, his brain filled in the gaps. That was new.

He's not entirely ignorant to his preferences, and not in denial enough to explain away any erotic dreams, but it's not something he's ever acted on, or ever would. Where he grew up and who he was around, masculine blue-collar workers and fellow police officers abound, was not a particularly safe environment. Most of his desires have stayed in the realm of fantasies and he's grown to live with that, merely hoping no one would be able to spot a particular glimmer in his eyes when he was growing too attached to his professors or men his dad knew.

He likes women well enough, anyway. Even if he barely gives a shit about what anyone thinks about him anymore, being as socially excluded as he is now, he is just *too* socially excluded for many opportunities to arise. He's not about to embarrass himself by going to a bar or some website. He can find porn he can almost stand and close the browser before that familiar shame of seeing the screen in his post-orgasm haze doesn't work its way inside.

Sometimes life is just about realizing that you'll never get to experience the kind of happiness that you hear about in stories, and taking what little peace there is on offer.

He decides he can manage some fruit for his own breakfast and has a few bites waiting for his coffee before he drinks it with something close to desperation. He rolls his head around his neck as he swallows. The hands felt so real. They felt so much like Hannibal, even if he doesn't know what that even means.

He doesn’t want to ruin what they have with weird dreams and associations. He wants to keep this one part of his life nice and safe.

It is curious. Just yesterday, he was happy with how he handled himself next to Alana. It barely stung to see her pitying smile. He didn’t think his affections had moved *on.*

It’s always more complicated for him, anyway. He can mix up the feelings someone has for him for the feelings he actually possesses, or his brain will make jumps that aren’t even there. His brain can latch onto reactions and feel them as though it's his own. It could be anything.

No matter, there’s nothing he wants to do about it. His life is strange, and a sexuality crisis and unhealthy attachment to Hannibal, his friend the psychiatrist, aren’t high on the list of burdens. Just to be safe, he emails and cancels his therapy appointment with Hannibal this week, citing his busy schedule, which isn’t exactly a lie.

Before the Christmas party in four days, he has to prepare and deliver lectures, catch up on grading, and stay on call for Jack, all while keeping himself and eight dogs alive. He’s gotten this far with his dwindling health and sanity, and he can make it another week.

A few days later, he doesn’t think he can make it through the week.

It’s an exaggeration, but he really doesn’t want to be at this banquet hall with a band that alternates between classical music and cheesy carols. His tie is choking him half to death and everything is too hot.

Skimming the area, he quickly finds the few people he recognizes. Some teachers that used to nod at him in the staff lounge; Price and Zeller with red faces that indicate a bit too much champagne and Beverly watching in mellow amusement; Jack walking around greeting the crowds with open arms and a cordial smile; and last but not least, Hannibal and Alana conversing with a small crowd of people from which Will can practically smell the stuffy psychiatric offices off of. With the exception of Hannibal, whose office smells like granite pencils and a log-burning fire and his particular expensive cologne. Nothing that would have a ship on the bottle, Will thinks with bitterness.

Will quickly moves on, taking two flutes of champagne and finding a partially hidden spot by the wall to scope out the scene. If Jack asks, at least he was here.

He feels sick again and there's no hiding the sweat that has plastered his hair to his forehead. He's dizzy and tired and hasn't had an appetite for three days now and he doesn't know what to do about it other than ignore it and keep on going on with his life. He leans against the wall and digs out another aspirin to wash down with his champagne.

He thought he had made his way through the Christmas party without being seen, but Hannibal appears next to him so suddenly it's as if he teleported across the room. Will straightens up.

Hannibal plucks the other champagne flute out of his hand and takes a sip with a teasing smile that crinkles his eyes. Will can't find any words for a moment, and Hannibal beats him to it.

"Have you chosen your crack in the wall to dig your roots into?"

At least Hannibal has apparently decided to ignore his excessive aspirin intake, digging into his anti-socialness instead.

"Ah, yes, I've been the wallflower at parties for as long as I can remember. I'm sure you're shocked."

"You might be surprised to find that we are much the same," Hannibal says, leaning against the wall close to Will. "Except instead of observing people from afar and trying to deduce their life stories, I typically mingle and try to subtly dig out their secrets."

"This is a good vantage point. I can see how each person interacts with everyone they meet, and how they change their demeanours accordingly. It says a lot about their motivations."

“Good point, although, there is only so much you can hear them say from this distance.”

“Turning it into a guessing game makes it more interesting anyway. I mean, I could already tell you that the agents you see around the room are just a bunch of egotistical, misogynistic, borderline-psychopathic meatheads that never quite got over the urge to impress their parents, now faking their way through unsolvable case after unsolvable case. In any one of my classes, let’s say 30 kids, there are probably only one or two agents-in-training with any hope for this work, and that’s if they don’t push themselves too hard and end up killed in the line of duty the first time they get an interesting case. Now think about what that means for the statistics of these tenured agents.”

Will turns to see Hannibal studying him closely.

“Sorry. That was grim. I must sound like a pessimist. I don’t like to get into these moods, but to avoid it I usually have to extract myself. Put up certain barriers. I’m feeling particularly *porous* these days.” Will’s eyebrows twitch with the beginnings of emotions he can’t control. He wishes, not for the first time, that he was just a normal colleague for Hannibal to talk to.

“It is understandable, knowing your mind. I have to put up certain barriers as well.”

Will glances up from the spot on the floor he’d taken to glowering at. “Yeah? What kind of barriers?”

Hannibal reaches into his suit and pulls out a small flat container, gold-plated with teal accents, incidentally matching his suit. Or perhaps not incidentally, Will thinks.

“It is more of an inside joke, I must admit, but it has its uses. A snuffbox, which rose in popularity during the 18th century as a symbol of status. It offered a seamless and classy way for aristocrats and monarchy to carry tobacco with them by simply placing a bit of snuff on their noses.” Hannibal demonstrates by opening it up and dabbing a delicate amount onto his nostril and breathing in.

“It was, amusingly, adopted more widely for its particular flavours,” he continues. “Individuals then used it to mask the smells permeating around them. Which, as you can

imagine, likely were not all lavender and roses among the lower class."

"Is this your way of telling me I smell like shit? Rather subtle of you, Doctor," Will teases.

"I would not like to mask your smell, but I would still like to convince you to change that aftershave. It is more that, in a large event like this, there is bound to be a number of people that have drenched themselves in pungent perfumes or cologne. I have a sensitive nose and this offers me just a bit of reprieve. I am impartial to the tobacco and sometimes fill it with my own blend of herbs or glucose."

Hannibal offers the box to Will and he chuckles as he reaches out for a pinch. "I'm starting to think you're even more judgmental than me."

Will breathes some into his nose, surprised that it doesn't make him want to sneeze. The smell is floral and just a little bit bitter.

Hannibal tucks it back into his suit. "Perhaps. Which is only to say that you do not have to hide or apologize for your grim demeanor. Personally, I only came because I was interested to see the culture of the FBI; such a rare look into one of the most powerful agencies in the world. I should have just taken advantage of your insight."

"Stick to the crime shows, it's much more interesting than this bureaucratic shitshow," Will says, drinking half of his champagne in one sip. He thinks what Hannibal gave him did contain some tobacco, if his slight head rush is anything to go by.

"Real life will still be so much richer than any interpretation, though I agree that the individuals of interest are few and far between. I should have known I found the most interesting agent already." Hannibal looks pointedly at Will.

"Special investigator," Will corrects. "I'm the one getting therapy from you, there's no need to flatter me."

“You refused therapy from me this week.” Hannibal points out.

“I’ve been busy.”

“Perhaps your schedule means you need someone to talk to even more than other weeks.”

Will doesn’t reply, not bothered enough to draw out his fake excuses to Hannibal who would see through them in an instant. Hannibal thankfully moves on.

“Sometimes I like to step back and look at a gathering like this one from afar and imagine it as an early Renaissance painting, such as *The School of Athens*, as if it was a crowd of young scholars all engaged in discussions of politics, philosophy, art, gossip, and the like. When I walk into the crowd, I find that I am not too wrong, and perhaps we are not all that different from our mirrors from a few centuries ago.”

“Really? I sometimes see a Hieronymus Bosch painting in front of me and walk into a world that is just as strange and incongruent as it seems.”

Hannibal chuckles. “Your mind must be a wonderful place.”

“If you enjoy terror, then yes, absolutely. I’ll trade you. I imagine you see the world as a beautiful place.”

“Perhaps we see the same terror, and I just happen to see that it’s beautiful.”

“What I see isn’t beautiful,” Will whispers, stepping away to grab some more champagne when a waiter comes near. He grabs one for Hannibal and returns to him.

“Not with that attitude.”

Will sighs. “You don’t have to stand here and keep me company. I’ll do my rounds soon and prove to Jack that I can represent him well.”

“I have already told you that I enjoy your company, and I don’t like to repeat myself. Now, tell me what you see,” Hannibal nods toward the crowd.

“Right now what I see is that the new director looks like the guy in *American Gothic* with a tux on. ”

“Okay, we’ll play this game,” Hannibal says, looking immediately smug. “Hm. Ah, of course. That woman, blue sequins holding her glass in that peculiar way, the man next to her invading her personal space. Very much exudes Vermeer’s *The Girl with the Wine Glass*.”

Will expends almost his entire knowledge of art history to indulge Hannibal, though it doesn’t take long to reach his limit. He listens to Hannibal compare the attendees to far more obscure paintings and sculptures, describing their contexts to Will with enough detail that if he didn’t know any better he might have assumed Hannibal was a fine arts or Greek history scholar rather than a doctor and psychiatrist. He drinks back his champagne and grows loose listening to Hannibal’s voice, cracking jokes and judgments of his fellow employees that he’d never say aloud to anyone else.

Looking at Hannibal, he thinks he could be a statue in a museum, a unique work that would catch anyone’s eye. All sharp, strong edges, a solid physique, and a constantly inscrutable expression that would make any artist famous *if* they could do it justice.

“And you...” Hannibal says, turning to face Will fully.

“What?”

“I am considering what painting would suit your likeness.”

Will shakes his head, internally cringing at the thought of Hannibal complimenting his appearance. He makes the leap before he recognizes any evidence. *Is* Hannibal's body turned flirtatiously toward him or is Will making wishful associations? Did Will move closer or subconsciously invite it in? He takes a step back and Hannibal raises his eyebrows.

"This doesn't feel very professional," he says.

"My apologies," Hannibal says, not looking very bothered. "I understand you have always wanted to keep a level of professionalism between us."

"Well… yeah," Will says, looking into his glass.

Hannibal looks away then, and his expression sours a bit. Will is confused until he hears Jack's voice right in his ear, and Will's does too.

"Ah, you are here. Will, I'm sorry for this, but something happened."

"What is it?"

"We've just received a concerning tip about Frederick Chilton being taken by Abel Gideon. Will you come with me?"

"Now?"

"Yes, now. Doctor Lecter, I am very sorry I wasn't able to stay and chat."

"Dr. Chilton's safety comes first, surely," Hannibal says. "This job does not wait. I will be heading out soon in any case."

“It was good to see you, if only briefly. Will, you can come with me,” Jack says, turning to leave.

Before Will can go, Hannibal touches his arm.

“The Face of War, Salvador Dalí, then. That’s you,” he says, before letting Will stumble away.

Will is, unfortunately, aware of that reference, and the mental image sinks into his skin.

His health deteriorates rapidly during the drive. It’s worse than the excessive sweating at the Christmas party; it’s a whole damn waterfall crashing around him. Halfway through the drive, slouched in Jack’s passenger seat, he finally realizes the extent of his burning sickness.

“I want you to wait outside,” Jack says while they’re still en route. Will tries to watch the snowy, winding road before them but his eyes seem to be shutting on their own accord.

“That’s probably best,” Will concedes.

“You look like hell, Will. Worse than usual.” Will might laugh at the bluntness on a better day, but he doesn’t have the energy right now.

“I feel like hell,” Will says. “Actually, no. I feel fluid. Like I’m spilling. I must be coming down with something, I hope it’s not contagious.”

“You seemed fine earlier.”

“I’m fine and then I’m not. That seems to be my life these days. I’m sure this will pass, too,” he says, except internally he knows that a fever like this is not normal for anyone.

“This work that we do, it will compromise your immune system if you allow it. You’ve got to keep things in perspective. You’ve got to keep *yourself* in perspective,” Jack says firmly.

“Well, ‘myself’ is a little hazy at the moment.”

“You’ve got to start taking better care of yourself.”

“Build my resistance?” He chuckles darkly. “I might not be able to do this job for much longer. After these killers, I’m probably done, or else ‘optics’ may be the least of your worries. Just so you know.”

He hadn’t planned to tell Jack yet, but reality feels slippery enough that he can’t find it in himself to care.

Jack is quiet. Will watches his hands flex and twitch on the steering wheel before his head hurts too much to keep his eyes fully open.

“Not going to try to convince me to stay?” Will asks.

“It has to be your decision, Will. I will respect what you have to do, but you know that more people will die if you aren’t here. I can see that this isn’t good for you, too, and if you can’t see any way out of it, well... It would be unfortunate for a lot of people. You’re our best profiler. You’re the best profiler I’ve ever worked with.”

Will’s headache burns painfully and he presses his fingers into his eyes.

“I’m good if I’m *conscious.* You want me to catch the Chesapeake Ripper. Call me back for the Chesapeake Ripper, then, and nothing more. But Jack, if I’m being honest, I don’t know

if he'll ever be known unless he wants to be."

"Maybe I should have brought you on just for him. But I don't regret pushing you on the rest of these killers because of how many people have been saved over the past few months, I just don't. Perhaps I don't tell you enough that I appreciate what you do for me."

The praise and kindness mixed with the blatant manipulation is hard to keep track of in Will's tired mind.

"Appreciation isn't going to save me, unfortunately. And I don't know if being put solely on the Ripper's case would have done me any good. He's the last one I want in my head. He could dig in so deep, I just know it…."

"You just can't take it all in. You've got to let go of as much of it as you can. You just gotta let go."

Will shakes his head and immediately regrets it when his head pounds even worse. Everything is buzzing. He forces the words out of his mouth. "You know, it's hard to shake off something that's already under your skin."

He blinks back into reality when the car stops and Jack leaves. He sits for another moment, thinking about what might be happening inside the observatory. As far as he knows, Abel Gideon is probably terrorizing and mutilating Frederick Chilton right now, blood and fake confidence spilling out of him in waves. Will wonders how much he cares.

Will doesn't think he's ever had a fever this bad, sweat caking his entire body. When he gains the strength, he pushes his way out the door and basks in the cold air. He'd love to be face down in the snow right now. He stumbles a few feet away from the vehicle and nearly does fall face first a few times.

He hears a familiar snuffle and turns to the side. The stag. He lost him the other night, but here he is, grand and proud before him, black-feathered chest jutting out with confidence. Its head raises high, antlers sharp and untouchable many feet above Will. The stag's eyes gleam as they look directly at Will.

He lost him the other night, but now he has a chance to follow him and make it right.

Will steps through the snow after the beautiful creature and wishes Hannibal would show up when he becomes lost in the darkness yet again.

Chapter 4

Chapter Summary

> Will wakes up in the hospital after his health rapidly deteriorated on his way to catch Abel Gideon. Hannibal comes to visit and gives him some interesting insight about the Sky High Slayer.

The darkness continues, or so he assumes.

It's not that he remembers being out of his mind for any lengthy amount of time, but when he finally opens his eyes he can tell that something has happened. The blinding lights and the smell indisputably point to him being in a hospital. There's also the aching in his bones and the dryness of his mouth. He doesn't even really have it in him to panic anymore, so he just fumbles for the call button.

When the nurse finally turns up, she tells Will that he has a fever of 105 and twice as many white blood cells as he should have. He slept through Christmas alone in his hospital bed, which has to be a new level of loneliness, even for him.

Jack turns up not much later and it's as comforting as it could possibly be to have the last few hours filled in for him—or as much as can be.

After wandering off and losing time, he made his way to Hannibal's house—and he tries not to think of how mortifying *that* is—and then he stole Hannibal's car keys and drove to Alana's house to shoot Abel Gideon. Meanwhile, Frederick Chilton was rushed to emergency with his guts literally spilling out.

Some tests come back and the nurses tell him that they have no answers for him. Georgia reminds him of as much when he visits her a few hours later when he can stand up, seeing the opportunity in front of him. No one ever knows the answers to his problems.

He wanders, he talks to Georgia, he rests, he misses his dogs (thankfully safe with Alana now), and he tries to imagine what life would be like if he left the FBI behind him. He tries not to think about how astoundingly bad last night went for him.

When he wakes again and the figure of Hannibal slowly comes into focus at the foot of his bed, he sighs in relief. Hannibal lists the ingredients of what is clearly just fancy chicken soup, which he tells him as much. It's endearing.

Will pushes himself out of bed and lets Hannibal guide him by the elbow to the table even if he doesn't need it. Hannibal sets out his food like he's tending to a sick child. He's not opposed to being taken care of by Hannibal.

"The nurses tell me you've been wandering, Will," Hannibal says, pouring him tea.

Will sighs, taking a bite before replying. He doesn't really want to talk about Georgia, or murder, or madness. He wants to talk about normal things. He wants a friend.

"It's nothing. I've just been a bit restless. It's nice of you to visit."

"What's troubling you?"

"Same old. But I think you're right."

Hannibal raises his eyebrows.

"This job isn't good for me. There are more important things in my life. Maybe I can have a normal life. Maybe I deserve it," Will says and then smiles a bit sadly. "Or something close to it, if I can manage this… illness, mental illness, whatever it is. I'm just tired."

Hannibal leans forward eagerly. "You're tired because you bury yourself in the minds of others for Jack's use instead of developing your own potential. I am certain of your potential,

even if I may not know exactly what it looks like. There is a better way to play with this world you find yourself knee-deep in. What you deserve, Will, is to find yourself outside of what people expect of you."

"Very inspiring, Dr. Lecter," Will says, teasing.

"I want what's best for you, Will, and I will help you find your ground."

"Will you still find me interesting if I'm not caught up in murders every day?"

"I've always found you interesting. Besides, I believe the more pressing question is whether or not you find me interesting yet," Hannibal says, blowing gently on his soup.

Will recalls the conversation Hannibal is referring to immediately. He doesn't hold back his smile. He likes it when Hannibal turns more playful.

"Yeah, I'd say you've caught my attention," Will says.

Hannibal stares at him curiously and unfaltering, as if waiting for Will to take back what he said. Will doesn't. He stares right back, even if it takes a great deal of effort to maintain eye contact. He hadn't planned to flirt with Hannibal, he just feels *good* suddenly. He's more confident in himself with Hannibal here. He still remembers how nice it was to be together and ignore everyone else at the Christmas Party.

"Good," Hannibal says, finally. "Then I reckon we'll always find things to talk about, don't you?"

Will turn his attention back to his soup, still smiling. It warms him from the inside out. "I hope so. I haven't had a chance to psychoanalyze you, yet."

"Ah, you remember that conversation."

“Where do I even start? I imagine you have a careful image already, pre-picked answers of all your passions and stories.”

“Seems you’re already psychoanalyzing me.”

“I’m just interested. Why don’t you tell me something I don’t know about you? Think of it like a distraction from my boring hospital life, and something to make us a bit more equal.”

“I enjoy dancing, and I was trained in over a dozen dances when I was younger.”

“That’s generic. Impressive, sure, but generic. And I’m not surprised, you move like a dancer, I’ve learned to observe subtle things in people, and that’s not even subtle.”

“Ah, you want to be surprised. I imagine you want me to tell you something vulnerable.”

“Would be nice. I’ve been very vulnerable. Tell me something vulnerable back, quid pro quo, Doctor.”

“I suppose it’s only fair.” Hannibal squirms a bit in his seat, folding and refolding his napkin once.

“I’m teasing. I don’t mean to make you uncomfortable, so don’t feel pressured.”

“But your desire for my vulnerability is real, and I understand the desire. You are right, friendship is about giving and taking and is important if we are challenging the power dynamic of psychiatrist and patient. Quid pro quo, it is.”

Will waits patiently, spooning more soup into his mouth.

“I suppose now you know more about the extent of my love of fine art, and you may have noticed that I am most impartial to the Renaissance period. When I was a young man living in Italy, I used to regularly visit the Uffizi Gallery in Florence to sketch Botticelli’s *Primavera.* Between classes and my culinary passions and drawing anatomical sketches for my professors, I always found time to return to that work. I thought it was beautiful. It reminded me of what you said about your home, your little boat on the sea. Familiar images can be just as much a home to us as a space we rest our heads in, and here at this painting was where I could find a bit of peace. The beautiful courtyard of my mind. It wasn’t until recently, so far from that particular home, that I realized I miss the comfort of that painting. I was feeling especially nostalgic last night. Usually, I can indulge in any number of hobbies, but that art captured me deep enough that I would return every day forever if I could. It reminds me of the turn of spring, the bloom and birth of things, our ability to evolve.”

Hannibal bows his head to eat and doesn’t look at Will.

“Thank you. For telling me. I do understand.” Will sits back and fiddles with his napkin on his lap.

“Was that the kind of story you want from me?”

“It doesn’t matter the nature of a story, I just want honesty. And yes, a bit of vulnerability, too.”

“I believe I delivered.” Hannibal raises his eyebrows in question.

“I think it’s small, but for your comfort level, it feels big, and I appreciate that.”

“It’s also an apt reference. You are considering a rather large change. It seems like spring is on the horizon for you.”

“I could use some sun.”

“Will you resign immediately?”

“No. I want to wrap up this…” he grumbles at the name he knows has caught on. “Sky-High Slayer case first, as soon as I can. He can’t be that far away.”

Hannibal hesitates. “I had another thought about this killer, though I don’t want to disturb your rest here.”

“No, something to think about will do me good. Tell me.”

“As long as you continue to rest. Jack won’t have you working on anything for a few more days now, so don’t ask him or he’ll shut it down. But I think I know where you can find our killer,” Hannibal says, leaning forward a bit mischievously.

-

Will wants to catch his killer as soon as possible. He’s been having dreams of falling to his death every single day now and he would like to stop feeling like he’s on the edge of a precipice. If he can catch this murderer then maybe his brain will finally settle.

That’s why he’s here, alone and against recommendation. Everyone would just tell him to rest and take his antibiotics. He knows himself, though, and he feels clearer than he has in a long time.

Hannibal suggested the killer came from the outside-in to the rooms of the crime. It would explain why analyzing security camera footage brought them nothing.

Will watches a cleaner squeegee the outside of an office building from his car. It’s early in the morning and the streets are empty. He watches the man rise higher and higher in the air on a cart and clean the building to a shine. Will just wants to talk to him, and get a gauge on who

he is, or who he knows in his line of work. This employee is in the same area as the last crime scene, and Will has a good feeling about it.

His phone beeps and he finds a text from Jack.

Did you check yourself out of the hospital????

He puts his phone away and ignores the incoming call. He wipes some sweat from his brow. Jack will be angry if he finds out Will is here. Will just can't help himself. He wants to see the killer's face. He half wants to scale the rope to the cart and throw the man right off of it himself. He imagines his head cracking on the sidewalk, spilling and dipping into the cracks before it sinks into the ground below. Now *that* would be justice.

Will gets out of his car and ventures to the coffee shop next door. He checks his phone again and finds another text.

Don't do anything dumb, Will. You're sick. Where are you right now?

Will taps his foot as he waits for his black coffee and then sips it as he ambles outside. The man is just reaching the ground again.

"Hey, man. What's that work like? Tough hours?" Will asks.

The man half spins, startled by Will's voice. He's older than Will expected but looks rather strong.

Will slouches to one side. "I'm looking for a job. My last boss was an asshole. Was just thinking it might be better to work outside of a shop."

"Yeah? What kind of work do you usually do?"

“Some of everything, my last job was fixing boat motors, but I got a bit sick of it.”

Will is dressed in some of his most casual clothes, trying to fit a more blue-collar look, which wasn’t hard to find in his closet. Not to mention that his beard has grown out more without being able to shave in the hospital.

“Good job finding that. It’s bullshit surrounded by bullshit these days. Can’t get anywhere in life, and even those that do don’t find true happiness either. None of us do. Not when societies’ so *fucked.* It doesn’t matter how many people you try to save, people will never be free.”

“You can say that again,” Will says, watching him carefully. It’s him. He knows it’s him. He feels a rising excitement.

“If you want to try this job, be my guest,” he says, climbing down. “You can find the feeling of freedom high in the air, in the reflection of the glass. You’ll see.”

Will nods. “Yeah. I think I understand.”

“I’ll get you my boss's phone number. I left my phone in my car, just over here.”

Will follows hesitantly. The man opens the door to the backseat. “Maybe I can get your name, tell him you recommended me.”

“I don’t think so. You might give me a bad rep.”

Will falters at the comment. The man reaches into his car, digging around in a bag.

Will's phone starts ringing, and with some relief, Will reaches for it, already devising an excuse in his head.

He's about to open his mouth when the man swings his arm back and hits Will across the temple. Will falls, scrambling on the pavement as his coffee goes flying. He snatches up his phone again, clicking desperately.

"Jack. Jack? Downtown Baltimore, that's where I am—"

The man grabs him from the back, covering his mouth. Will kicks against the sidewalk until he feels the man hit the side of the car. He bites into the palm on his mouth until he tastes blood, trying unsuccessfully to swing his elbow back into ribs. There's a groan behind him and he hopes there are people near enough to hear, but last he looked the street was empty. He keeps fighting anyway, thrashing and grabbing rather unsuccessfully, until something grabs his hair and yanks him back hard enough to bring tears to his eyes. The unmistakable sting of a needle pricks his neck and he whimpers, thrashing as hard as he can even as the fight leaves his body.

Arms drag him into the backseat and his head pounds too much to open his eyes.

"I know it's you, Will Graham. I knew you would come to me."

He hasn't been in the news for this case, has he? Fucking Freddie Lounds, if it was anyone, it was her. Will feels his consciousness fading away as much as he tries to stay awake. The car is already moving. He tries to lift up to see out of the window, but his body doesn't move how he wants it to.

"Hold on. I'll show you freedom. You're a traitor working for the FBI, you know that? With a brain like yours, you could be so much more. You will see, you will see…."

Will goes under and hears nothing more.

-

When he comes to, dizzy and disoriented, he's standing up. There are no bounds or restraints on him and he's free in the room, to his surprise. He takes a hesitant step to steady himself and then spins around to take in his surroundings and check for any threats hiding in the corners.

It's a hotel room, pretty generic looking, but large. He doesn't see the man who kidnapped him, but he does see a figure near the window. *Out* of the window, actually. The window is open and daunting, high in the air. He has a bad feeling about this. He doesn't know why he's free.

Shaky step by shaky step he walks closer to the faceless figure that is strapped in and ready to fall to their death. Will feels *off* but he can't quite place what the problem is, if the fever is back or if he's coming down from whatever he was injected with.

Will steadies himself by the window and leans around the figure to see their face. He doesn't want to psych himself out by looking at how tall the ledge is, so he keeps his eyes forward until the person comes into view. He halts at their side.

It's him. It's his own face and body sitting there, strapped and bound and leaning slightly over the edge of the precipice.

"I don't think I've come down," Will says aloud. "I *hope* I haven't come down from whatever he gave me. I'd better not be fucking dead."

He walks a bit closer and finds an IV in one arm. The body he's staring at breathing steadily. Alive.

"For now, at least," he mutters.

The self that he is looking at stares blankly out the window across the city of Baltimore. The sky is dimmer than he remembers it last being.

He wants to save his body from the precipice but he knows this form isn't real. Instead, he trails his eyes up the ropes up to the ceiling to a little ring of metal that's been screwed into the ceiling that looks like it may fall any second now. The rope hooks through and stretches taut across the whole ceiling, striking another angle at another ring, and then wrapping around the door handle. He traces the knots and tries to remember his knowledge from tying sailing rope and everything Beverly told him about this killer. It's precarious and he reckons that's the point.

The door rattles.

"Stop!" he screams, running toward the door. "It's wrapped around the door handle, I'll fall."

"I *know,* Will." It's Jack's voice. He nearly sobs in relief at the familiarity. "We're cutting through the door. We'll be in there as fast as possible. Are you alone?"

Just me and myself, he thinks. "Yes, yes, I am."

"Are you hurt?"

"I… don't think so," Will says, but that seems so subjective. He's been hurting for a long time now.

"Jack, he's—I'm tied up but it's not that secure. Work faster." Will walks closer to the door and watches the saw slice through the wood

"The vibration of the saw isn't helping," Will says, panicked.

"Work faster," Jack demands. Will can hear the fear beneath his steady, determined voice.

Will sees the knot of the rope shake. Maybe this is how he goes. Maybe this is how he's *meant* to go. Always grasping for normality. Maybe he deserves to fall. Will feels even more dizzy and stumbles where he stands.

He doesn't feel like himself. He feels so far gone from his old self and he can't even be certain that this is real. Has his personality finally split in two? Has he, right now, in this consciousness floating freely through the room, finally embraced the darkness that he's worked so hard to bury under? Is it all over?

Or has he simply become the very killer that put him here?

"I can see how ugly the world is and I resent it," Will says. "I don't know how to get out of it, either. All I know is that everyone else deserves to drop toward hell, too."

No one replies to him. He isn't sure if they can hear.

He steps close enough to the door that he could touch it. He turns back to look at the figure in the window and sees the receding hairline of Garret Jacob Hobbs.

"He will drop to the ground with dead weight. But me? I will fly. I will figure it out. I will convince the world of my beauty, to make up for how ugly I am seen. They don't understand, and they will never understand fully, but I know I *see.* "

Will reaches out his hand and feels the rough texture of the rope tied taut. He runs his fingers over it and then digs into the space between the knot.

"This is my design," Will says.

He tugs the knot and it slowly comes loose, unravelling in jerky motions as the weight of his own body pulls it down. All the rest of the chatter goes silent as the knot comes free and the

rope snakes through the metal rings at a rapid speed. He watches every inch it travels, enraptured, and then looks to his body falling forward too late—

The city is below him and he shouts in fear, 50 feet in the air and he's *free-falling,* no longer an observer but the very person who is going to crack on the pavement.

He jerks and thrashes as he falls and finally closes his eyes before he can hit the bottom once and for all.

The pain doesn't come and he considers that he might be dead, or that he was maybe dead all along. He timidly peeks one eye open. He gasps loudly, and jerks his head to the side as someone pulls him back. Jack. Jack is here. He can hear the chatter of other FBI filling the room, high energy. Too high of energy. Will feels like he's going to shatter and burst.

He breathes in shaking gasps as someone cuts the ropes off of him. The voices in the room blur into nothingness and soon the shapes moving around are too much, too, and he squeezes his eyes shut. He can't feel anything either. He knows people are touching him, though. He thinks a swab goes straight in his mouth, and people ask questions that he thinks he answers. He tries to remember what drug this killer gives to his victims and he can't remember. He can't remember much of anything, how he got here, how he survived the fall…

Something pulls his eyelids open and he startles when he has sight again so unexpectedly. Familiar eyes appear before him and he breathes out all the air in his lungs.

"Hannibal?" he asks through a painfully dry mouth.

"Yes, Will."

Hannibal is only inches away, staring into his eyes with clinical concern. His hand smooths out under Will's bangs and it's gloriously cold. Will leans into it and Hannibal keeps him from falling completely forward. He lifts his arms that barely even feel like his arms and clutches onto Hannibal. He's shivering violently, he's so damn *cold* all of a sudden. He holds on tight, squeezing through the thickness of Hannibal's coat.

Hannibal's face moves in closer to the side of his head and Will lets his eyes flutter closed as he leans into his body heat. There's a gentle breath against his ear and it makes a shiver rise up his neck.

"—try to listen to me right now. You're okay, but I'm going to exaggerate your state so I can get you out of here as fast as possible and avoid you being questioned. I think being bombarded would not be conducive to bettering your mental state right now. Nod if you understand."

Will thinks he nods, and then doesn't even open his eyes as he's spun around.

"Will is indeed under the influence of something, and the issue now is his psyche and his anxiety. I need to take him out of this environment *immediately* so he may recover his mind."

"Go, go, and *call me."* Jack's voice again. "Make sure he gets to medical."

Will is relieved to be steered away. He blinks and the patterned carpet of the hotel shifts in his vision. Hannibal wraps his own coat around Will's shoulders as they walk and he slouches under the warm weight. They take the elevator and Will feels every inch they descend with exploding pressure, just like he did when he fell.

His anxiety thrums against his skin and the noise doesn't quiet until the moment the Bentley's door shuts behind him. Finally, silence. He turns toward the driver's seat and is happy when a hand meets the side of his cheek and keeps his head up for him.

Hannibal is looking at him again, tilting his head to see in Will's eyes, searching.

"Do I have to go to the hospital?" Will asks. He thinks he might be slurring his words but he can't tell. His face feels numb.

“No. You’ll be much more comfortable at mine.”

Will nods, grateful. When Hannibal removes his hand, Will’s head nearly falls too. He feels the gentle thrum of the engine start, and then the hand returns to his shoulder, holding him steady. It feels like the only thing keeping him up.

“You’re dissociating, Will. You won’t feel like this for much longer, but I’d like you somewhere more familiar and comfortable as you recover. Luckily, we are very close to my place.”

Hannibal drives and Will looks back to the building, trying to find the spot where he fell to his death. He can’t.

“I fell,” Will says.

“You didn’t fall. The FBI managed to open the door and grab the rope before you fell.”

“I never hit the bottom.”

“No, you didn’t.”

“But I am over the edge already. I’m falling. It’s too late for me now, I can’t crawl up gravity. All I have to wait for now is the ground rushing toward me and I will be different than I am now, I will be *changed.*” He covers his face with his hands in despair.

Will feels Hannibal’s eyes on him but he doesn’t say anything.

Chapter 5

Chapter Summary

After nearly being killed by the Sky High Slayer, Hannibal takes Will away to recover.

Chapter Notes

2 short chapters today! enjoy!

Will already feels more like himself when he enters Hannibal’s home. It felt like that would never happen again, but Hannibal’s kitchen is warm and familiar and the drugs are wearing off.

Hannibal delivers him a tall glass of water and stands close, observing his every movement. It’s a clinical gaze, but Will can see that Hannibal is concerned. It reminds him of stepping into Hannibal’s office after Budge’s attack, and seeing how evident Hannibal's relief had been.

“Swish and spit,” Hannibal says. “I’ll go get a toothbrush too.”

“Huh?”

“There’s blood in your teeth. Am I right to assume it’s not your own?”

“Ah. I bit him.”

“Good,” Hannibal says, rather casually.

Afterward, Will chugs down most of the glass of water before Hannibal gently pries it from his fingers. Will complies and follows Hannibal to the dining room like he's on a leash and can't go more than two feet apart.

Hannibal sheds his blazer, rolls up his sleeves, and opens a first aid kit. Will stares. If he were to grow unprofessional feelings for someone, then Hannibal might be his type. Hannibal might be anyone's type. Which is probably not something he should be thinking about.

Hannibal cleans the skin on his forearm where the IV was roughly stuck in. A rather colorful bruise is already blossoming around the spot. Will points to his neck and Hannibal finds the other needle puncture wound, cupping Will under his jaw with his thumb and forefinger to keep his head turned up. Will gulps against his palm.

"Precedent suggests that our killer did not use dirty needles, but we will have you tested for HIV and Hepatitis B and C to be safe." Hannibal pulls out a needle of his own. "I have a colleague who will be here shortly to collect your blood sample. May I?"

Will holds out his arm for Hannibal to draw his blood. Will watches him sink the needle in with ease.

Will's head spins. He has a weird sense of deja vu, but it passes as Hannibal stores away the vial.

He forgets about the hit he took to the temple until Hannibal tilts his head to look at the bruise.

"Do you have a headache?"

"I haven't *not* had a headache in days. It wasn't that bad of a hit."

Hannibal frowns but turns to inspect the chafed skin on his arms from the ropes, and asks what else hurts. Will almost wishes there was something else.

“Can the answer be my psyche? Any bandaids for that, Doctor?”

Hannibal looks away. “I know tonight was hard on you. I was very worried. Death came far too close to you tonight.”

Will is touched at the genuineness in his voice.

“I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have gone. It… it was maybe self destructive. I wasn’t feeling like myself when I went. It was like I was looking for chaos, and too late I realized how stupid it was. That wasn’t me, *I* didn’t want to go there.”

“Part of you wanted to hunt him, Will.”

Quietly, Will concedes. He considers admitting the dark fantasies he was having, but decides not to.

“Something’s up with me and I want it to be over. God, I’m just so sick of this,” Will says.

He puts his head in his hands and Hannibal lets him mope for a while longer. When Will finally lifts his head again he says, “They didn’t catch him, did they?”

“No, though they will keep looking.” Will drops his head down again.

“He’s going to change his method now. Or hide for a while. We’ll find his name, but not him. And he won’t stop, but who knows when he’ll be confident to kill again? All because of my mistake.”

“There is no use to dwell on it, especially because I feel confident that one day you will be able to find him again. Now, when was the last time you ate, Will? And took your antibiotics?”

Will thinks for a long moment, but everything is hazy.

Hannibal sighs. “Come.”

Will follows him back to the kitchen and ignores Hannibal’s gesture to the chair in the corner. He walks right up to the kitchen island and watches Hannibal gather and sort ingredients. He needs something else to focus on.

He watches Hannibal wash and cut vegetables for a few minutes, providing his mind a welcome distraction. Hannibal’s hands are steady and precise and it looks as though he could do this in his sleep.

Hannibal stops mid cut. Will’s eyes trail up the knife to Hannibal’s blank stare at the counter. Will furrows his eyebrows, trying to understand what the issue might be.

“Forgive my sentimentality,” Hannibal says softly.

Hannibal sets down the knife, wipes his hands, and walks around the kitchen island with determination. Will gets wrapped up in a hug so fast he gasps.

Hannibal’s arms squeeze over his biceps and one hand gently strokes at the back of his head. Will wants to say something to break the awkwardness, but he knows he shouldn’t if Hannibal isn’t, so he just slowly puts his arms around Hannibal’s lower back. The fabric of his vest is smooth on his palms. Hannibal breathes in deeply against the side of his head and the memory of his aftershave getting insulted comes to Will’s head. Hannibal should *not* be smelling him now. He thinks about making a joke about how he can’t be blamed for smelling like shit today, but he doesn’t want to ruin the moment.

He stays as still as he can, unable to really enjoy the comfort when his head is running at a million miles per hour overthinking it, but this is still better than the Hannibal in his dream. This Hannibal holds him tight, and *he* smells nice even if Will doesn't.

Hannibal turns and smells Will right at the base of his neck. Will stiffens. That's more strange.

Hannibal pulls back, almost hesitant, with his eyebrows furrowed.

"What is it?" Will asks.

Hannibal stares at him, but avoids his eyes, looking from his head to his neck, as though deep in thought.

"Hannibal?" Will asks again, growing nervous himself.

Finally, Hannibal says, "You smell feverishly sweet. There's a heat to it."

"O… kay?" Will says.

Hannibal looks away, and then breathes in before speaking.

"Encephalitis is an inflammation of the brain, and when severe, it can cause headaches, disorientation, hallucinations, altered consciousness… Symptoms often fluctuate. It also won't be found on a brain scan unless the doctor knows what to look for."

Will lets out a long breath. "Oh, that… that sounds promising?"

"Very promising. I am almost certain that I am right."

Will laughs breathily, in relief. Hope feels good.

“Huh. Thank you,” Will says.

“You don’t need to thank me.”

“I want to. I don’t know what else to say. You’ve really been there for me, Hannibal.”

“So, we *are* on a first name basis now,” Hannibal says with a crooked smile.

It takes Will a moment to catch on to what Hannibal is talking about.

“Oh. I didn’t even realize. I suppose I consider you Hannibal in my head and it slipped out today.”

“I’m glad. It’s more personal.”

“And now we’re on a hugging level apparently, too?”

Hannibal smiles. “I embraced you as a friend, not as your psychiatrist.”

“Yeah, I sure hope so. Now *that* would be weird,” he jokes, before turning serious again. “This… this is nice.”

“Then I will feel free to embrace you and you will call me Hannibal.”

“This sounds like an upgrade to official friendship.”

“Perhaps it is.”

“And it’s a saving grace. If you hadn’t come close, you might not have smelt… the inflammation? You can really smell that?”

“I have always had an acute sense of smell. Smell elicits more memories than any other sense, and so my precision has grown better over time. I was able to utilize it as a medical doctor.”

“Well. Lucky for me.”

“Yes.” Hannibal steps away from him.

Hannibal walks back around the island and puts his landline between shoulder and his ear while he resumes cutting vegetables. Will listens to him request another brain scan, firmly requesting his way into a closer and closer appointment date. He then listens to Hannibal call Jack and tell him that Will is resting and unable to talk until at least tomorrow. Will can hear the rising voice on the other end of the phone. He doesn’t really care about the investigation right now, not when he knows the killer is probably far gone.

Will fights the urge to walk around the island and invade Hannibal’s space again. His affections might be stronger than he first expected. He might already be pushed over the edge.

Hannibal makes him pasta, a creamy mushroom rigatoni, which he’s sure is an attempt at comfort food even if it’s far fancier than anything Will would choose. It’s a quiet night and Will appreciates the silence. He doesn’t want to think about it. Being kidnapped and tied up to die is trauma he doesn’t know how to even begin to process.

Hannibal drives him home after dinner, assuring Will that he and Alana will deliver his car home in the morning.

Hannibal comes inside for a rest before his drive home. Will gets them both some water but his attention stays on Hannibal kneeling on the floor to pet Lucky. She rolls on her back for a tummy rub and Hannibal indulges her, ignoring the gentle nips at his hands.

“She likes you.”

“Well, I’m flattered. The one with the little fucked up teeth doesn’t like me.”

Will is shocked into laughter at the crudeness in Hannibal’s ever polite tone. “Yeah, Zoe doesn’t like many people. Especially men.”

Hannibal looks at him.

“She tolerates me. It’s been impossible to adopt her out. She’s an old asshole and the vet bills add up.”

“What are the rest of their names?”

“You want to know all of my dogs’ names?”

“They know their own names, don’t they?”

Will shrugs. He points and says each of his dogs’ names. “Winston, Jack, Ellie, Harley, Buster, Max, and of course Zoe and Lucky.” Hannibal keeps encouraging him until he explains their quirks and temperaments and the sad situations he saved them from, pointing out the ones he can’t give for adoption as much as he tries, and the ones he can’t bring

himself to give up. He's not ashamed of having an excessive number of dogs, and Hannibal doesn't make him feel like he needs to be.

"A very endearing and non-conventional family you have created here," Hannibal says.

"No white picket fence in sight."

"And would you even want that?"

Will shakes his head. "Hard to even imagine. Bringing a partner and kids into *this* life is too much to consider."

"Then perhaps you have to find someone who exists in your world, too."

Will watches him carefully and sips his glass of water instead of replying.

"I must return home. Will you be alright? And don't lie to me. It won't serve either of us."

He wonders what Hannibal is offering. If he would stay and play at normality with Will a little longer.

"I've been alone after nearly being murdered before, funnily enough," is all he says.

"Will you call me if things get too hard?"

Will nods. "Yeah, I will."

“Good. Jack will be angry at both of us tomorrow morning, too. Best of luck.”

Will chuckles, spinning his glass between his palms. Will follows him to the front door, standing half outside.

Hannibal opens his arms and, with an awkward smile, Will walks into them. He can’t help but stiffen as he’s wrapped up just as tight as before, chin on Hannibal’s shoulder.

“I have to say, in my time here, I have found American men in particular very annoying in their reactions to physical affection and to needing help.”

Will snorts and relaxes marginally. “Have you?”

“The standards of masculinity on this side of the world are quite exhausting. I promise you, it won’t serve either of us if you suffer in silence and distance yourself, either. Was your father or were any other male family or acquaintances physically affectionate with you when you were young?”

“I thought hugs were for our friendship. Sounds like you’re trying to psychoanalyze me, Dr. Lecter.”

“And you avoid questions just as usual. I have noticed you are a tactile person, and defer to the world of touch often, and especially while under stress, as if blindly searching for the reality around you.”

“I… would say that’s accurate.”

“You would do well to consider it a valid and conscious coping mechanism you can turn to when you are struggling and crave something to hold onto. Think about how touch feels and soothes you and what kind of tactile stimulation satisfies you the most. And don’t shy away from physical affection with myself or other people. If it is reassuring, you will have to try very hard to make me feel awkward or uncomfortable.”

Will keeps himself from squirming. “Sounds like a challenge.”

“Well that would entertain me.”

Hannibal pulls back and winks at him. He’s already turning to leave by the time Will registers the action.

“Goodbye, Will. I’ll see you in the morning with your car and we can attend your appointment together.”

“Right, yes. Goodbye, Hannibal.”

He leans against the doorframe, blocking the dogs from running after Hannibal with his legs in the doorway.

He has the urge to take off running after Hannibal, too. Tell him to stay a little longer, sit together for a while, stay the night. Will makes himself stand still and wave. Hannibal’s car backs away and Will urges it to stop. He doesn’t want to be alone here anymore.

Don’t go, he thinks. *I want you here after all.*

Chapter 6

“I have anti-NMDAR encephalitis,” Will says the moment he walks into Jack’s office the next day, Hannibal trailing in behind him. “I know you’re not wanting an excuse for my actions yesterday. You can blame me for failing to tell you about the extent of my confusion and my hallucinations these past weeks. I should have asked for a break before. I wasn’t myself yesterday and that’s why I went after him and I fucked up and lost our guy, and I’m sorry.”

Jack stares at him, tapping his pen on his desk irritably.

“I’m going to need some time off, too. I only just got my diagnosis this morning after Dr. Lecter figured it out,” Will says. Better not to drag out the bad news.

Jack stands and comes a bit closer, looking between the two of them.

“Are you going to be alright?”

“Will is going to be put on immunosuppressants, and I will oversee his recovery. I expect a smooth process,” Hannibal says.

Jack nods and keeps his eyes on Hannibal. “I brought you in specifically to tell me if Will was well enough for this job,” he says accusingly.

Will puts a hand up quickly. “It was my doing, Jack. Whenever he told me I should stop, I refused and denied. Our agreement meant that I still made the final decision for myself.”

Jack sighs but doesn’t seem to have much fight in him. “I’m not happy about what happened, but all we can do now is move forward.”

“What I can give you now is all I know about our guy.”

“I would appreciate that. We had a match with the DNA we found on you, he’s a contracted window cleaner originally from Miami named Leo Jonas Patrick, goes by Jonas. He’s nowhere to be found so far, what little family he has left can’t get a hold of him.”

“I have a good read on him, but it will be up to you to find evidence about where he’s gone to now. If I’m being honest, I don’t expect to find him any time soon. But there are things he wants to do and show me. I think he’s far from done.”

“I feel like I’ve dragged you around the whole damn world today,” Will says. “Appointment, FBI, phone store, and now you still want to see me for therapy?”

“I insist on it,” Hannibal hangs up his coat and turns on the lights in his office before heading straight for the fireplace.

“Been a long day.”

“I don’t intend to exhaust you further,” Hannibal says. “Just to consider all the changes happening in your life to avoid you falling more overwhelmed and exhausted than otherwise from hiding it all inside. My goal is that you will start your break and your recovery with a fresh mind and acceptance of what has happened.”

“I like these changes. I very much accept my sick days and putting out the fire in my brain.”

“I agree that this change is good, but change is still a shock to the system. And you’re forgetting your incident with our killer. An event like that changes you.”

“More trauma, yay me.” He sits in his chair and waits for Hannibal to join him. He hears the fire crackle to life.

“This can be an opportunity to learn about yourself, Will. You went off on your own, lying to the hospital staff, and you hunted our killer. Until you turned into the hunted, what were you thinking about?”

Will shifts in his seat.

“I was thinking about catching him. I wanted to finish the job.”

“Were you thinking clearly?”

“I *felt* like I was thinking clearly. Obviously I wasn’t.”

“Clear does not mean rational.”

“Okay, then I sure wasn’t rational. I could have caught him easily with backup.”

“Are you beating yourself up about it?”

“Of course I am. Wouldn’t you?”

Hannibal shrugs and waits. Will doesn’t really want to talk about this, as much as he knows he needs to. It’s probably better to get it over with.

“I felt clear because I knew I could find him, and I knew I could understand him. I just wanted to scope him out. He knew me, so he must have read about me, and I should have prepared for my new notoriety among killers.”

Hannibal points at him. “And that’s where you failed. He had the upper hand that you didn’t consider.”

“I failed in many things. I shouldn’t have gone.”

“You are operating under the standard of failure that Jack understands, applying your results to a goal you never had in the first place. Assess yourself fairly, Will.”

“Jack’s standard of failure is my own.”

“What is that standard of failure?”

“Justice.”

“Do you have the same definition of justice as Jack?”

“What are you getting at here?” Will pushes himself to stand when he realizes his knee has started bouncing restlessly. “You said this was going to be an easy conversation.”

“It’s only as easy as you make it for yourself. You are defensive, putting up barriers against an attack you merely imagine; I am the placeholder of all the attention you are terrified of letting in. Look at me, Will, does it seem as though I am judging you?”

Will turns from where he is walking away and meets Hannibal’s eyes. Open and curious but inscrutable, as always. That fact bothers him more now.

“I told you, you control your image well. I’m not sure what you’re thinking when you look at me.”

“Why don’t I be more forward then? I accept you, Will. Even the parts you think I will run from.”

Will walks close to the desk and thumbs the nice leather on Hannibal’s notebook. He thinks about what Hannibal said about finding things to touch. He picks up something metal and he likes how cool it is on his palm. It slowly warms in his grip.

“If you know me so well to be so confident that you’ll never run from me, then why don’t you just tell me what my insecurity is? It’s a miracle to find clarity in our therapy talks sometimes. You assume I can keep up.”

“You can, but I will indulge you this once. I believe, had things gone your way yesterday, you would have discovered a truth about yourself: that doing bad things to bad people makes you feel good.”

“When you say it like that, it sounds pretty understandable.”

Hannibal dips his head slightly, waiting for Will to go on.

“If you knew what really went on in my head you might feel obligated to call the police,” Will says. “Harm to myself, harm to others—those break our confidentiality agreement.”

“There is no confidentiality agreement among friends, just secrets we are sworn to keep.”

“Now the line of our relationship is getting *very* blurry,” Will says, putting the paperweight down with too much force.

Hannibal comes closer to him, leaning on the corner of the desk to face Will.

“Close your eyes and remember it. Your head on fire, your senses heightened, your brain clear: what do you want?”

Will walks further around the desk, away from Hannibal.

“To catch him.”

“I will not tolerate dishonesty. Tell me what you wanted.”

“To do what he did to everyone else. Make him *fly*. Happy?”

“An eye for an eye? Humans often search for balance, reciprocity.”

“I can’t take his life eight times. But I can take it.” He taps his finger a few times on the desk. “I know who I am, though. And I won’t do it. There are killers in my head, but the killer isn’t me, as much as people might think.

“No, Will. These are your own thoughts. Your very own design.”

“No, this is *his* design, and I just got a bit too close. And either way, it sure sounds like something to run from.”

Hannibal smiles at him, though, and shakes his head. Will watches him, searching for a trace of judgement.

Will clears his throat. “Well? I’ve let you in more than most. Do you have a professional opinion? Do I check any of the boxes?”

“I’m not concerned about boxes, nor fitting you in any of them, not any more than I’m concerned about defining myself. Some things are simply more obscured and restricted by language. Are you truly curious about my answer?”

“I mostly want to know how you see me.”

Hannibal drifts toward the fireplace and holds his hands out to warm them. Will goes to stand next to him and mirrors his position, staring at their hands next to each other in the firelight.

“When I look at you, I see someone who interests me, for reasons I knew intrigued me before I ever met you, as well as for a number of reasons I never expected to be interested in,” Hannibal says. “The way you think is entirely unique and I find that potential to be beautiful, and I think it is a shame that you find many of those same potentials to be ugly still. I also see the opportunity for friendship in you. I see someone who can understand me back, who can assume my point of view, and accept me as I have accepted you. You are not a person I wish to run from.”

Will grapples for what to reply for a minute with so many thoughts circling his head at once.

“I always considered us to be quite different,” Will says.

“We are, very much so.”

“You know you’re one of the last people I’d expect to enjoy the company of?”

“Oh, why’s that?” Will catches a look of genuine offence flash across Hannibal’s face.

“There’s your confidence... it comes across as very egotistical at times. You’re a psychiatrist trying to get in my head. You’re rich and rather pretentious, which is not my crowd.”

“Eat the rich, and all that?”

“Yeah, exactly.” Will can’t hold back a smile.

“I see. Do these things still bother you?”

“Nowadays I wouldn’t say you’re boastful as much as self-confident, and at least you’re self aware. It hasn’t been so bad letting you in my head, even tonight.” He smiles to himself. “The rich thing might be harder to get past, but I get the impression that you’re a hedonist because of depravity rather than being spoiled all your life; you stockpile, you don’t waste. And it’s not like I’ve never been called pretentious.”

“Does this mean you can *stand* to be in my company?”

Will elbows him gently. “You’re supposed to have too big of an ego to be offended.”

“My ego will stay untouched through any cruel words but I find myself dearly hoping that you will reciprocate my regard.”

“If anything, I think it’s unbalanced the other way.”

“Is that so?”

Will gulps. “I’ve grown quite attached to you. Thought I needed to back off.”

“Perhaps we are both lost in our minds not realizing that we are on the same level.”

“Maybe,” Will whispers. His heart thumps faster.

Will watches the fireplace. The warmth on his face makes him want to curl up right on the floor here and go to sleep. He'd like Hannibal curled up with him, too. He looks to the side and watches the fire dance on Hannibal's face. The light defines the shadows beneath his cheeks and he looks more intense than usual, but still soft in his expression.

"I should go home now if I want to make it there in one piece without passing out," Will says.

"Yes, of course."

"I'm in recovery, haven't you heard?"

The sides of Hannibal's eyes crinkle. Will sways a bit closer, something magnetic and painful pulling on his chest.

It feels very obvious all of a sudden. This is no mistaken association or confused attachment; this feels like a romantic pull, an adolescent, innocent feeling in his gut that he hasn't felt in actuality for a long while. The shame rips through him almost as quickly as the desire does, his gut squirming and saliva rising. Hannibal is almost too much to look at, so much so that he doesn't know how he ever laid eyes on him without realizing it.

"Are you alright?" Hannibal asks, gently grabbing his wrist. Will realizes a moment later that he might be trying to feel his pulse. How doctorly. Will has no good explanation for how fast his heart is beating, so he pulls his hand away, despite knowing Hannibal probably already felt it.

Hannibal doesn't say anything, though. Just observes him with that not-smile that makes Will feel like he's both in on the joke and the butt of one.

"Yeah, fine," Will says, flashing an easy smile.

He's not particularly shy. He could tell Hannibal about the feelings he senses between them and receive at least a mature response, only something pangs inside of him—fear of rejection or disappointment or loss of all the good that has been building up in his head where it concerns Hannibal. He can't forget his place: he's still not *not* Hannibal's unstable, even if intriguing, patient. He can't deny their differences in lifestyle, either. Hannibal might not even have a preference for men.

He can make do with being next to Hannibal in this capacity. He is genuinely happy at the prospect of this companionship, mildly erotic dreams and increasingly tender fantasies be damned.

It feels par for the course with how his life usually is, stockpiling his sorrows with new sources as soon as something good happens. He couldn't expect the universe to give him a break from death, a diagnosis, and a vacation without a different kind of mortification to replace it all. The best relationship he has had in ages cannot be given freely without spoiling it with the ache of romantic longing. It must be some kind of cosmic joke, and he's not laughing anymore.

Even if his skin itches to have Hannibal wrapped around him, he manages to carry himself across the room to the exit door. Except Hannibal *does* wrap him up in his arms before he can escape, because this is something they do now apparently, even though Will doesn't think he's ever been on hugging terms with any male acquaintance in his life, not even family. He feels a bit mortified to think that it's probably mostly for his benefit, with Hannibal noticing how devastatingly touch-starved Will is, which Will can't even deny. Will doesn't even know how long he's gone without any significant physical affection or human touch. Their hug is over before Will can begin to enjoy the relief of closeness, but his cheeks are warm nonetheless.

"Goodnight, Will. I will talk to you soon."

Will forces his legs to move him outside the door, awkwardly waving over his shoulder. "Goodnight, Hannibal."

He slams his head back into his car seat three times over, furious at his heart for refusing to slow.

Chapter 7

Chapter Summary

> Will gets time off from the bureau to recover from his encephalitis. The break is welcome, but his ever-increasing feelings for Hannibal leave him feeling restless and wanting.

Will sleeps more than he has probably ever has in his whole life.

It's this detail that convinces him of just how sick he really was. Maybe he's making up for years of pushing himself too hard. All he knows is that when life finally lets himself rest, he doesn't get out of bed for a very long time.

He keeps an alarm to take his medication and an alarm to feed his dogs, and otherwise he lingers in the blurry world of dreams. Recovery could take weeks, or even months, from what he understood from the doctors.

This makes him feel very guilty when Hannibal turns up to check on him. He sees all of the missed calls on his phone after being awoken by his dogs barking at the Bentley.

Wincing in the cold doorway and skimpily dressed in a pair of thin boxers and nothing else, he says, "You didn't have to come," but Hannibal just pushes past him.

"I assure you I would have come anyway. Recovery is easier with a friend. It is only a bonus to make sure that you are not dead on the floor somewhere."

"It's snowing, the roads can't be any good out there." Will crosses his arms in front of him, which feels like a pretty pathetic attempt at modesty. He doesn't miss Hannibal looking him up and down.

“I hoped you would be kind enough to let me stay until it passes.”

“And if you get snowed in? These rural roads aren’t forgiving.” Will mostly says it because the fantasy crosses his mind. There’s no sign of the storm turning that severe, though he almost wishes it would. He imagines Hannibal needing to stick around for a while, get cozy in his space.

“Then we may have more things to worry about,” Hannibal says. “Perhaps we will have to hunt on the land to supplement your food throughout the winter.”

“At least if the worst happens, I know you’re up to it.”

“For now let us enjoy the comforts of home cooked soup, although it probably would taste better had I risked my life to catch it.”

“Yeah, okay, you can go set it up in the kitchen, let me put on some clothes at least. And, uh, thanks for bringing it for me.”

“My pleasure.”

Will gets changed near his bed watching the corner to the hallway warily. He doesn’t usually need to worry about privacy here, but the prospect that Hannibal might walk in on him in even less clothes than he is already in isn’t *un*appealing. He shakes the thought away. He might still be half dreaming.

Most of the dinner *feels* like a dream, next to a candle that Hannibal had taken the liberty to light. Halfway down his bowl and Will’s head is drooping where he sits, the flickering liquid starting to blur in his vision.

“Man, why am I so tired,” he says, rubbing his eyes.

“Your body and mind are spent. Come. I’ll save your leftovers in the fridge and return for the container in a few days time.”

Hannibal helps Will up and Will sacrifices his dignity for the ease of letting Hannibal guide his path. When he was still a young boy, he’d often pretend to be asleep so that his dad would carry him in from place to place, not exactly gentle in his steps, but affectionate nonetheless. It was nice to slip away mentally and not have to think about where to put each step.

“In a few days I might still be pretty shit company,” Will says as Hannibal guides him right to his bed.

Hannibal just shushes him, and Will agrees that Hannibal has always been too generous to indulge a self-deprecating comment like that. Maybe Will just wants to hear the confirmation that Hannibal will be back.

“Would you like me to let your dogs out?” Hannibal asks.

“I—please, I’d really appreciate that.”

Will watches from his bed as Hannibal puts on his outer gear. He’s suddenly too aware to sleep. He imagines Hannibal stepping through his land, snow crunching beneath his designer boots as dogs rub dog hair on his trousers. In his mind, the sky outside is pitch black and Hannibal is seeing the same mirage that Will does, his boat on the sea, the only place he’s safe. He suddenly wants Hannibal to see it, and appreciate its beauty with all his worldliness, but the sun has yet to set and he’s already turned off the lights for Will.

When Will wakes, everything is dark and Hannibal is long gone.

As he had promised, Hannibal comes to see Will more while he’s recovering, half feverish and exhausted with his alarms and little else in the way of self care.

It’s fatigue like Will has never known it before, making his sight blur and his muscles ache until all he can think about is crawling back into his sweaty covers. He sleeps deeper than he ever has, waking up disoriented and lost. The fever rises and falls, meaning his dreams continue just as vivid and surreal as always.

Hannibal doesn’t bother to call first, just wakes Will with three startling raps on the door between Will’s personal barking alarm system and presents still-steaming dishes to his table. For a couple of weeks, Will is unable to be that present. He endures Hannibal’s cold hand on his forehead happily and dutifully lists his changing symptoms. Hannibal is doctorly, yet Will can pretend it’s as intimate as he wants it to be in the dim evening lighting of his kitchen.

Day after day Will gains more energy. He’s been able to read a bit and go outside with his dogs, even though the fatigue still overtakes him quickly.

Hannibal returns in another three days and Will promptly turns on the coffeemaker.

“You do not need to make yourself more alert for my sake,” Hannibal says, setting his things around in the kitchen like it’s his own home.

Will shakes his head. “You came all this way. Besides, it’s boring being sick. I’ll take the company I can get.”

“I assume you are having no pressing health concerns?” Hannibal asks.

“Nope, I’m still kicking, so much so that I’m just about ready to do the cha-cha.”

“I’m glad to see the spirit back in you. Let me pry, then. Are you enjoying your time away from the bureau?”

“I don’t miss it. It’s drab here, but better when I have energy to get things done. I’ve never really stopped in my life. I was worried that if I stopped moving, that everything would tumble over, but now that I’m here, it’s very quiet. Teaching was alright. Maybe I’ll go back to that one day, keeping a safe distance from where Jack wants me most.”

Hannibal nods once. “If only he couldn’t find his way to those lecture halls. It is easy to ambush you between those rows.”

“You would know.” Will smiles.

“Are you not worried about Jack’s influence?”

“I’ve been privy to all his charms and guilt-tripping. It’s nothing I can’t handle. I didn’t take his early chances to say no. I can now, I have the hindsight.”

“And what about saying no to that voice that comes right from your head? The one that says it's good to save lives, the one that maybe knows all too well that it sometimes feels good to do bad things to bad people? Will it be enough to look from a distance?”

“It was before, and besides, I’m more stable now. I’m not… I’m not going to do what I did to that man.”

“I trust you, Will, so long as you trust yourself.”

“I do,” Will says, perhaps with more emphasis than necessary.

“Since you are in such high spirits today with your health clearly on the right track, why don’t we celebrate with a dessert? I presume you have some variety of baking staples?”

“Enough for you to scrounge something up, I’m sure. But what are you, my butler? If we go by social class, I should be polishing *your* shoes, or something like that.”

“I’m your friend,” Hannibal says, pointedly, seriously.

“Alright, I get it, go scour,” Will says with a wave of his hand, unable to keep the edges of his mouth from rising.

Between moving month by month as a kid and swearing off most meaningful relationships for peaceful solitude as an adult, he’s never had a friend that he would distinguish as his closest friend, a person he’d always go to because of the person rather than the context or convenience. A person that’s *his*. Even recognizing his not-so-friendly feelings for Hannibal now, it feels better than great to have him so close.

The possessiveness hits him like a truck. *His* friend. He wants Hannibal to be close to him and no one else. He suddenly resents the social circle that Will imagines that Hannibal has, fantasy turning red over those faceless, classy figures.

Will watches from where he leans against the counter with his coffee mug in hand as Hannibal puts together some sort of pastry. The possessiveness might go further than just friendship.

“Have you ever been married?” Will asks.

Hannibal looks up at him, the gaze more piercing than usual in slight surprise.

“Domestic imagery before me and all, I have to wonder,” Will clarifies.

“And with my age, I understand, it is natural to wonder.”

“I know it’s annoying of me. I get the invasive questions too if it makes you feel better, but probably less so, since people can take a good look at me and go *ah, that’s why.*”

“The only reason that the average person might think that is because of the ways you purposefully make yourself off-putting.”

Will scoffs. “If I’m so off-putting that you assume I must be doing it on purpose then that must be really bad news for me.”

Hannibal tilts his head forward in an admonishing way. “You don’t fool me. You know very well how you fill out the shoes of a persona that isn’t welcoming to others. The unwarranted self-deprecation is only one example. There is no other threat to your desirability.”

Will grins. “How did you manage to turn this conversation on me so fast?”

Hannibal looks at him from the corner of his eye again while he continues to work. “I have never been married, no. I am not against the practice, personally or otherwise, just the opportunity has never arisen for me.”

“*Good enough* opportunity,” Will corrects. “You absolutely have had potential suitors, but none worth it.”

“And why do you assume that?”

“You don’t seem like the type to fish for compliments.”

“I just think the compliments from you would be more illuminating than most.”

“And you think you don’t use me for my empathy.”

“I never said that.”

Will quiets for a moment wondering what exactly he means by that. “That makes me less likely to want to share, you know.”

“Even when you’re searching for details in return? Unfortunate. It takes a reciprocal vulnerability for a conversation like this.”

“You overestimate how much I want those vulnerable details.”

“Do I?” Hannibal questions, and Will grins. He’s burning with curiosity.

“A cultured, well-educated and well-heeled, attractive bachelor in a populous city? And there were all those dinner party invitations, so I know you’re something of a socialite, as much as you claim to be a wallflower stuck to people’s coat jackets, at least when you’re not driving out into the middle of nowhere with soup for me. Which brings me back to my first point of this domestic dream you’re encompassing, always cooking me anything you can get me to consume and waiting on me like an intimate servant. It doesn’t take an empath to deduce that lots of people would consider you a suitable partner. Happy?” Will asks.

It also doesn’t take an empath to realize that Hannibal is engaging with Will’s flirting, right down to the smile that hooks his lip.

“People have expressed interest in me, yes, of course. I often receive gifts on appropriate holidays with hopeful cards that I must return with regrets, and casual affairs need to be monitored before they grow too emotionally wrought.”

Will’s smile falls slightly and he has to put in effort to not wince at the term. *Emotionally wrought.*

Flirting and gentle care might mean very little against how Hannibal might control the damage of Will growing too emotionally wrought. All it means is Hannibal would possibly indulge Will in a casual affair that didn’t touch on his life too much, *if* there even was a slice of attraction there that wasn’t just Hannibal being his own charming self. It feels pathetic to even consider the potential.

“To say no one is ‘good enough’ feels too cruel for some of the individuals I grow close with,” Hannibal continues. “It’s more that no one has ever been worth giving up so much of the space and freedom that I consider so precious in my life. My hobbies are very important to me. I don’t consider my potential suitors to be competing with each other as much as competing to interest me more than my solitude.”

It becomes more effort to hold Will’s grin in its cheery place. Will may always be craving more. He’d better get used to that feeling.

Hannibal wipes his hands and steps directly in front of Will. There’s a socially acceptable amount of distance between them, Will thinks, but Hannibal’s presence still seems to crowd Will into the counter.

“Remember that I would never give someone my time and energy if I didn’t want to; I would never fake a friendship out of pity. I also value my time too much for that.”

It is sad to even think that Hannibal assumes that is Will’s only worry.

“I believe that.” Will smiles and nods his head in understanding so that Hannibal returns to baking.

Will watches quietly as Hannibal returns to his tasks, kneading dough with his sleeves rolled up. With enough concentration, he can almost feel those hands on his skin. He grips the counter behind his hips and wonders if he will continue to find contentment out of this intimate friendship with five feet between them, or if it will only grow harder. He wants to fantasize about them together. He wants to fantasize about them being a *family.*

Hannibal once gave him explicit permission to initiate physical contact, but it still feels far too difficult. If he starts, he might not be able to pull himself back. He needs to distract himself better from thinking about these things, but he’s still curious.

“Then I assume you have never been a father either?” Will asks, remembering how good Hannibal was with Abigail. The three of them could be so good, Will thinks, but they are fraught with difficulties, all related to Garret Jacob Hobbs. If only they had met in a different world.

To his surprise, Hannibal softens before him and Will watches him carefully. He’s quiet for a long moment.

“I was a bit like a father to my sister, actually,” he says. Hannibal smiles, and the expression makes Will wonder if he has ever seen a truly genuine smile from Hannibal before, no hint of an inside joke or mask of confidence or barrier of inscrutability. It relaxes his face into the lines around his eyes and mouth, making him look older than he ever has to Will, and even more handsome.

“Her name was Mischa,” he says with so much reverence that Will almost feels like he should look away out of respect. Hannibal’s eyes are directed at the task in front of him but they are glassy and far away and Will thinks he’s seeing something else entirely, a memory that Will is not privy to.

“I didn’t know you had a sister,” Will says. He thinks back to what he knows of Hannibal and the spaces he exists in. A bond this strong should have been obvious to Will. At least from most people.

“She passed away very young,” Hannibal says quickly.

Will doesn’t have the easiest time connecting with Hannibal, but right now he feels his grief. Any person, empath or not, might have felt burdened by the grief currently in the room.

Hannibal wipes his hands and clears his throat, and with a slight shake of his head he buries it down. Within seconds, the atmosphere regains the neutrality of Hannibal’s controlled demeanor.

“I’m sorry,” Will says. As flat as the sentiment usually is, he hopes Hannibal can tell that he means it. “Would you like to tell me about her?”

Hannibal shakes his head. “Perhaps another time.” It sounds final.

Will nods in acquiescence, even though he wants to pry.

“Abigail has made me realize the appeal of having a child, of influencing and shaping her to guide and support and in many ways, direct her life. She reminds me a bit of Mischa, actually.”

Will beams at him. “Yeah, I understand that. It really does feel like we are her fathers.”

“It is a precious thing to make a family.” Hannibal squeezes his arm affectionately.

Once Hannibal closes the oven door and washes his hands, he turns toward the living room. Will trails him like a dog tracking a bone, automatic and hungry.

“We have some time to kill now. Let’s think of some lighter things,” Hannibal says, choosing one of the newest arm chairs in the room.

Will lights the fireplace, knowing how much nicer it makes his subpar dog-filled living room. It’s also nice to do something with his hands. Out of the corner of his eye, he sees Hannibal pull a book off the shelf and flip through it. He stands and peers around at the cover.

“Shakespeare is your choice to fill the time? Really?” Will asks.

Hannibal grins mischievously. “You are a margin’s rambler,” he comments with clear satisfaction, sitting in the nearest armchair.

“Oh, jeez, that’s an old copy, spare me this.” Will steps forward with his hand outstretched but Hannibal holds the copy protectively.

“Nonsense, you’re delightful,” Hannibal says. “...and judgmental, which is most of the delight.”

Will quiets at the compliment, bitter that he’s so easy now when it comes to Hannibal. He moves closer and closer until he can gingerly lean on the armrest and read over his shoulder as Hannibal begins reflecting on his favourite parts of A Midsummer Night’s Dream and Will’s chicken scratch comments around the words. Will can smell Hannibal’s cologne strongly this close, and finds himself leaning closer and closer.

Hannibal stays until Will can’t hide his tiredness anymore. And Will does try to hide it, hoping to keep him around for longer. He eats his dessert without appetite and covers the rest.

Will indulges in his spot on the arm of Hannibal’s chair, an arm draped behind Hannibal’s shoulders just too far to touch, but when he nearly tips off completely, it’s impossible to hide his fatigue. Hannibal pats his knee and stands up. Will sighs and follows him to the door.

Will grapples internally about mentioning the roads and the late hour and the amount of wine that Hannibal consumed or just directly asking him to stay but none of the words come out as Hannibal pulls on his jacket. Hannibal pulls him in for an embrace with a hand stroking down Will’s hair.

“I’ll see you soon, Will.”

He’s gone just like that, and Will feels unsatisfied. He wants *more.*

The house feels so much emptier when there's someone he wants here. He scrubs their dessert dishes clean and then crawls into bed.

A few minutes of tossing and turning and he's wishing he had this energy earlier, but that's not quite it. He is still exhausted but also *restless* at his core.

Will rubs the heel of his hand down the front of his boxers, considering. He presses down and can't help but twitch his hips up.

He feels blindly for his personal lubricant from his side drawer.

He has always had a good imagination, it was what gave him the advantage in his career, and it *has* felt more vivid recently. Likely sometime after the encephalitis developed, he stopped being able to discern completely between his imagination and the hallucinations that plagued him. He lost hold on what constituted the line between reality and the dark things that existed in his mind. Sometimes he still grows confused. He wonders if it can work in his favour.

He closes his eyes and he can see the dark room around him. He can hear his dogs shifting and the radiator whirring, and then he can feel his mattress dip on the side where Hannibal puts his weight.

Hannibal comes over him, little more than a silhouette in the dark room, but the light of the moon hits his right cheekbone and makes his eyes sparkle. Will can just make out the way that his lips stretch and turn his expression into something much darker.

Will can feel the weight of Hannibal over his hips. He's fully suited and that needs to change. Hannibal pulls his tie until it unravels around his neck, and then he pulls back his suit jacket so that Will can see how his arms fill out his dress shirt. He takes off his vest next and then finally unbuttons the dress shirt, revealing tanned skin covered in a layer of downy hair.

He takes off his pants next, followed by his underwear. He is unfailingly confident and sure footed even as he works to strip down while staying so close to Will.

He crawls under the covers then and Will can feel warm, naked skin all around him. He freezes for a moment, overwhelmed, and reminds himself again that it's all in his head. The fantasy pulses out of focus so he quickly directs his energy to the sensations again. He imagines a kiss, a vague, distant sensation but addicting nonetheless, clenching his hands

against the air above him. He imagines the rub of Hannibal's body up and down and the pressure of his back sinking deeper into the sheets, his hand guiding the arousal just so. Will can imagine his smell, too, so particular to Hannibal's tastes and increasingly familiar. It's almost a feminine scent, when he thinks about it, but it suits Hannibal.

Will comes quickly and unexpectedly and gasps and opens his eyes for real to the dark ceiling above him. He finds himself alone, pushing himself up and down across the sheets with his own legs.

In the end, it's just his own slick hand, and he comes down and wonders if Hannibal would find this offensive. He cleans up with a tissue as fast as he can and tucks himself into his underwear to hide the evidence. With any luck, he'll be able to forget about it in the morning, and before the next time Hannibal shows up.

He takes advantage of his hazy post-orgasm mind and curls up on his side to try and sleep before he can think about it too much.

Chapter 8

Chapter Summary

> Will continues to try and make use of his break from the bureau but grows increasingly impatient when Hannibal doesn't show up as often.

A couple times a week, Hannibal brings Will various dinners and then they share a drawn out nightcap.

Hannibal often seems content to sit in silence or look through Will's things. He presses on his piano keys and recommends tuners that Will has no intention of calling. He observes his fly ties through the magnifying glass, subtly nodding his head in appreciation and petting the soft feathers.

He wanders along Will's bookshelf and spends a lot of time reading through the books that Will knows have scribbled notes in the margins. He can't imagine how many rude comments Hannibal is deciphering among the pages. Sometimes Hannibal even chuckles to himself and Will gets curious enough to go and see what he's looking at until they're both discussing the literature and chuckling.

They lounge in the comfiest of Will's secondhand chairs and talk about anything at all or just share in some comfortable silence. The dogs try to crawl into Hannibal's lap sometimes and he looks at Will rather desperately until Will calls them away. He doesn't know that Will considers doing the same thing too.

When they do talk, Will tries to think about something other than leaning in to kiss Hannibal. It gets easier when he finally starts to gain some energy back. He can focus his mind better on the things he needs to and the newfound clarity is welcome. Worst case, he busies himself with some fly-tying and leaves Hannibal to his own devices.

He tries not to get attached to Hannibal's presence, but it's already too late. An expensive coat draped over his armchair and tupperware soaking in his sink become comforting sights.

As his recovery progresses and Hannibal comes over less and less without the need to check up on him, Will fills his days with the things he always wanted to have time for. He takes himself ice fishing until he needs to give away some fish to the neighbors because there isn't enough room in his freezer. He spends a lot of time making enough fly-ties that they will probably last him the upcoming summer and possibly longer just because it's so relaxing, working late into the night with a dog sat on his feet.

He takes his younger dogs on long walks through the woods. He bundles himself in thick winter gear and then pulls booties on his dogs' feet and wraps sweaters around the little ones. He's sweating profusely by the time he has them all dressed and clomping around uncomfortably in their boots. It's Lucky's first winter and she takes the longest to get used to the boots, stepping in long arches as if she's navigating hurdles in her path, and stumbling off balance each time because she's still not used to her awkwardly grown size. She bites and growls at the velcro and Will gently disciplines her and kneels on the cold ground to fix it. She's more excited after getting used to them, running through the snow without pain, and still buries her entire snout in fresh mounds of snow for reasons Will cannot comprehend.

He works to train her not to chase the deer, with little success so far. Her other training is going very well with more time to work at various tricks. It's impossible not to spoil her with attention.

In the rest of his time, he repaints the walls and rearranges his living room and scrubs the grout in the kitchen floor and replaces his showerhead with a rainshower. He fixes up some spare boat motors and sells them for some extra cash which makes him feel less guilty about being kind of unemployed, although he doesn't spend much money at all anymore. He considers canceling his phone plan, too. It would be nice to know no one can reach him, aside from Hannibal who will just show up.

He could also pick up the phone and ask Hannibal to come by more. He spends over a week alone with a hollow ache in his chest and no explanation until Hannibal finally stops by and excuses his absence casually with the annual psychiatric conference in Washington, as if Will wasn't on the verge of heartbreak thinking Hannibal didn't care about him anymore. Or worse, that Hannibal was distancing himself so that Will doesn't get too attached. Will knows he should just call, but it doesn't seem allowed. It would put words to their cohabitation in a way that feels far past plausible deniability.

A few days pass without a visit and Will decides he has had enough. He's been stuck at home for too long anyway, so he fills a cooler with some fresh fish, gets in his car, and drives to Baltimore.

He rings the doorbell and then opens the door himself. He is shrugging off his coat when Hannibal enters the foyer, looking between him and the cooler curiously.

"Will, what a surprise."

"As if you don't surprise me all the time. I reckon I need to keep you on your toes, too. Besides, I think even my dogs are sick of me being at home all of the time."

"And what's this here?"

"Whether or not you think you deserve thanks from me, I wanted to give you something. I don't have all that much to give, but I do have a ton of fresh fish, and I thought you out of anyone could find something to do with it."

Hannibal picks up the cooler and sets off toward the kitchen. Will quickly follows behind as Hannibal sets it on the counter and looks through its contents.

"I can absolutely do many things with these. Thank you, Will, the quality will be unmatched I am sure, and the pleasant taste of sentimentality will not go unnoticed. I am very glad to see the fruits of your newfound energy."

Will beams as Hannibal begins moving the fresh fish to his refrigerator.

"There's an error message on your fridge?" Will says, noticing the outside screen.

"My ice maker broke. I will have someone in soon to look at it."

“No, don’t. I can fix it. Easy mechanics, free labour.”

Hannibal looks at him pointedly. “Will, you do not owe me anything back.”

“I want to. Indulge me in this, like I indulge in your graciousness, and call me first when you need handy work,” Will says.

Hannibal nods. “If you insist, then I appreciate the help.”

“Speaking of help, are you ever going to invite me back for our therapy-conversations or did I graduate when we caught the source of my brain melting?”

Hannibal closes the fridge. “I thought of this as more of a vacation as you recovered, but I absolutely intended to continue. I had not expected you to bring it up first, though, have your feelings toward therapy changed that drastically?”

“I can see the value in it, I suppose.”

“Well I am proud, that is a great change of attitude. And there is trauma we have yet to dig into.”

“Mm. Less exciting when you say it like that.”

“Tell me, how much do you think about your recent near-death experience?”

“My near-defenestration. Mm, I don’t think about it. Not the nicest memory.”

“Never? No dreams?”

“Out of sight, out of mind. Is the therapy session starting now? Did you miss them that much?”

“No, we had better not. Come, help me choose a recipe for your fish, I’d like to make something to your tastes. And we will have much to talk about soon.”

Hannibal, as expected, makes Will some of the best fish he’s ever had before, and Will lingers in his sitting room while Hannibal draws until there’s a real chance he will fall asleep at the wheel.

Will turns up the next day again though, letting himself into Hannibal’s foyer and wiping his feet on the mat. He passes Hannibal in the hallway and sets his toolbox on Hannibal’s kitchen counter.

“I wasn’t going to hold you to it, you know,” Hannibal says.

“*I* will. Besides, you’ll keep me from losing my mind.”

“I’m not surprised that you have trouble staying still. If you want work to do, I can find you things to do.”

“You’ll never get rid of me. I don’t leave projects unfinished.”

“I don’t intend to get rid of you.” Hannibal comes close and strokes a hand down his back. Will straightens up instinctively, but Hannibal is gone too fast.

“I’ll make you a drink, and then you tell me how I can help,” Hannibal says, fiddling with the coffee maker that looks to Will more like an 18th century chemistry set.

“Sure, if you want. I expect an easy fix.”

Hannibal raises his eyebrows at him. “Yet you came all this way for it. You know, Will, you don’t need an excuse to show up here.”

“You don’t need to call me out for it. Save me my dignity.”

“No need to save it in front of me. I am happy having your company and, while I do not worry about paying for labor, it is nice to have things fixed without having to host unreliable contractors. Does it help you feel our relationship is more reciprocal?”

“Yes. I suppose I don’t like feeling indebted, and you don’t have to tell me that you don’t see it that way. I know. But it would be nice to do some things for you too, I’ve been sick for so long and you did so much for me.”

“So long as you know it isn’t necessary.”

“Yeah, yeah. It still gives me some peace of mind.”

“Do you need these kinds of distractions to stop yourself from thinking of Jack’s loose ends? I imagine you don’t like not being able to deal with your killers either, how else do you extract them from you?”

Will sighs. “We really have to do this now? You have one more day before I’m coming to your office. And *willingly* at that.”

“I can’t turn off my instincts anymore than you can. I suppose my curiosity has grown too pressing, especially with your restlessness.”

Will digs around in the fridge, moving things around for access to the ice maker. “I did some research before. I have a feeling you’ll just have to clean your condenser coils.”

“Then there’s no rush, is there? Come sit and have a coffee with me.”

Will supposes this is what he gets for choosing a psychiatrist as his best friend and tying his coping mechanisms up with his attachment to said psychiatrist. He concedes and closes the fridge.

Will takes a seat in Hannibal’s lounge with his coffee. It’s a somewhat unsettling space with little light and discordant antique furniture, much less cozy than Will’s dog-infested themeless living room, but it still feels nice on behalf of the fact that it is Hannibal’s. Hannibal settles down close to him on the couch and Will makes a mental note that he should go buy a couch for them to be more comfortable.

“We spoke previously about how you hunted your killer,” Hannibal begins.

Will doesn’t dispute the word *hunt* only because he knows Hannibal would debate him on it, and he has a point.

“We have not spoken at length about how you became a victim to the same killer you sought out.”

Will looks into his coffee cup. “Ah. The fun part of the ordeal.”

“Were you already in this killer's head when he took you?”

“Not particularly.”

Hannibal waits. Will gives in.

“Weirdly—or maybe not so weirdly—I felt most in his head when I was nearly going to fall.”

“As you were tied up?”

“I… separated from myself. I came to and I was standing in the room looking at myself, tied up and unconscious. I observed the whole scene and came to understand it not as a victim.”

“But as your killer instead,” Hannibal finishes.

“Yeah, can you blame the ketamine for all that? I was concerned for myself at first, but the more I looked at his design, the more I understood. I understood so much that I began to *want* it to happen; it was *right*. I began to unravel that rope from the door myself, so ready to see it slither free and release my heavy weight like a building being demolished to begin anew.”

“And you *did* see yourself fall. I saw you searching for your own mangled body in the pavement as we left, unbelieving that I’d walked you out of there intact.”

Will shakes his head. “I was privy to my death again. The ground sped to me just like it has in all of my nightmares, but I’ve never actually reached the bottom, just like in the dreams.”

“You came so close to splitting yourself into killer and killed but the separation did not fully come into fruition.”

“I don’t know that it didn’t, actually.”

“Is that why you have been at a standstill?”

“A standstill? I made one of the biggest changes of my entire life after all that.”

“Your change brought you to the absence of the work and acquaintances you previously knew. You slept like a dead body through your recovery and now are growing restless as you find yourself with energy, because you still consider yourself a dead man separated from society. You have believed in your suicide even as your body grew strong again. Now you are worried about what you will find left of yourself if you move on with your life. Have your nightmares stopped?”

“They have, actually.”

“Because you believed the fall was completed.”

Will squirms in his seat. “It felt too late for me when I fell off that building.”

“I believe Jack made it in time, actually. Not just for your physical self, but for you psychologically as well.”

“He does seem to always be just this close to losing me,” Will says weakly.

“You are whole. You did not die, not even part of yourself, and you can continue to live. It would be extremely unfortunate, in fact, if you now strayed from the potential that you have.”

Will nods, but finds eye contact particularly difficult. It startles him when Hannibal’s finger goes under his chin and lifts his head.

“And I would like to see it,” Hannibal says. “We will have time to pull this apart in our sessions, of course, but go think on it. For now I believe I was promised free labour.”

Will grins up at him. He sets a hand just above Hannibal’s knee. It feels good to hold on for a moment. It even distracts him from his whirring brain, the gears clicking in his head to

reorient his brain to ways he didn't even know he needed to. He can feel the hard muscle of Hannibal's thigh and strokes one finger sideways. Even his trousers are nice and soft to the touch and it grounds him for a moment, before he realizes how intimate the gesture must seem.

He uses Hannibal's knee as leverage to stand up, and then knocks back his coffee, hoping the caffeine will help him get focused on things other than Hannibal. Hannibal and the way he seems to naturally understand Will so deeply. It's electrifying.

He avoided therapists and psychiatrists all his life for a myriad of reasons, but he also doubted anyone's ability to understand him clearly. Never did he even try to explain his brain to anyone.

Hannibal stands up to meet his height and Will only feels more seen. It's overwhelming, though not in a particularly bad way. Too much to really take in right now.

He makes his way back to the kitchen.

"Before I forget, I should let you know I have a dinner guest tonight."

Will spins. "A date?"

"A colleague," Hannibal says. "You are welcome to stay, as I believe she would be interested to talk to you, but I am uncertain whether you would feel the same back."

"Oh? Who?"

"A psychiatrist colleague. My psychiatrist, in fact."

Will busies his hands with clearing out the fridge. The possessiveness is back and in full swing with a blurry figure in his mind. A woman who knows Hannibal intimately, and likely

for longer than he has. Hannibal has given no indication that they have a sexual relationship, not to mention that it would be unethical, but Will can't shake the thought anyway, unaware of whether it's an association or a delusion.

It's an ugly feeling to have, and he can't seem to halt it completely. It would be torture to stay and observe their dynamic, though he considers it just to know.

Finally, he shakes his head. "I'll fend for myself. You can have a nice night, I don't want to intrude. Here, just help me move the fridge then I'll be out of your hair."

Hannibal grasps Will's nape.

"I just about never want you to leave," Hannibal says into his ear.

Will tries to pull away but Hannibal's hand is firm, squeezing on his nape in a way that makes his hair stand on end. "I'll be back to bother you lots more, don't worry about that," He insists.

Hannibal lets go with a hand sliding down his upper back. "Good."

Will has to force himself to move again.

Will leaves later in the day after insistence from Hannibal that he could at least stay for afternoon tea.

He sees a figure coming toward Hannibal's house as he leaves and considers dashing before he can meet her and have more associations to worry about, but he finds he can't look away.

She's stunning, to his dismay, like someone out of an advertisement for perfume, not a hair out of place and a psyche that's likely similar.

She makes her way down the path toward Hannibal's home and she subtly—but not subtly enough—looks from his loose-fitting khakis to his old coat to his face. Will considers saying *Yes, I was indeed here to fix Doctor Lecter's refrigerator, all so you can go enjoy your five star meal of* my *fish with an ice cold beverage,* but likely no one but him would find it funny.

"Are you Will Graham by any chance?" she asks when she nears. Will wonders exactly what hint it was that Hannibal gave that let her guess.

"And you must be my psychiatrist's psychiatrist, or perhaps you're even sort of mine through the principles of trickle down economics."

She smiles politely but doesn't even fake amusement for his benefit. His self-deprecating jokes definitely won't fly, then.

"Bedelia du Maurier. I have heard a great deal about you," she says.

"I hope he kept the stories interesting, at least. As much as I would love to be hounded by not just one but two psychiatrists about it all, I was just heading out. If you'll excuse me."

He gets halfway past her when she says, "It would not be necessary, I imagine. Hannibal is extraordinarily intuitive and persuasive to others on his own. However, he is not as insistent as you about your relationship being between psychiatrist and patient as much as he is about the friendship you two have."

He's unsure what to reply to that so he just nods, still hoping to make a clean escape.

"If you would ever like a more objective person to talk to, don't hesitate to reach out and make an appointment," she says before walking on. Will feels the tingle of something unspoken below her words, but cannot place what it is exactly.

He hurries away, hoping to stop the sick, bitter feeling from crawling up his throat, ignoring the bits of conversation he hears as Hannibal opens the door and greets her warmly. He sinks in relief when he is able to slam his car door behind him, but he still feels tethered to that house, unwillingly aware of every step and interaction. Hannibal sliding Doctor du Maurier's thousand dollar coat off her delicate shoulders and welcoming her in to share inside jokes about their minds and their unstable patients. The intimate lighting of Hannibal's home in the evening without Will in it. Red mouths chewing on the flesh Will procured for him. Did he invite her over because he wanted someone else to share Will's catch with?

He drives fast, hoping to feel that line between them snap, but it has only grown sturdier these past few weeks. It's truly excessive just how much Hannibal is on his mind these days, sparking physical and emotional sensations that Will has never felt before. He has struggled with misplaced attachment and possessiveness before, but never to this extent.

He could just tell Hannibal. He could explain to Hannibal that his feelings do not need to be reciprocated. He just doesn't want to hide anymore, least of all hide from *Hannibal.* Ironically, Hannibal might have some of the most useful advice for him to get over it, but their moments pass by in contentedness he doesn't want to disrupt.

He enters his home and goes to bed hungry. The hunger hurts, but no more than the longing does.

And if Hannibal's bachelor status changes one day and he marries someone else? Will doesn't know if he would ever be able to eat again.

He genuinely considers driving back to Baltimore just to sit outside and try to get a sense of what is happening. Maybe if he was still crazy he would do it, but he has enough sense to stay home and mind his own business.

He sinks into a fitful sleep, characteristic of it being too early to be tired, still lingering in reality when the nightmare begins but unwilling to fight his way out of it. He has the unsettling sensation that he has already fallen and is imprinted into the ground below him. Too late, too far, but no: they spoke about this. He didn't fall. But what would Hannibal know? He tries to stand up but his skin has caught on the textures in the sidewalk and he

can’t sit up without stretching and tearing his body. It’s when he panics that he sits up in his dark room, panting and awake again at half past one.

It’s no more horrifying than the rest of his nightmares are, but he hasn’t had such bad nightmares for a long time. He has grown used to Hannibal slipping into his dreams, slipping into his bed, slipping into his body, filling what has otherwise been lonely for a long time, that it’s jarring to find that craved normalcy replaced with blood again.

He makes the trek to the line of woods to look back at his house, uncertain of what else he could do to feel safe again.

Cold and isolated in the woods, he makes up his mind. Whatever shame or sickness or rejection he may face, he can deal with it. It will be better to know than to torture himself. He is alive, he repeats to himself. He can live. He is not Georgia, needing to pull off the masks on those around her; Hannibal has shown Will his face, and that has to mean something.

“Hello, Will. Please come in.”

Will gets a strange sense of deja vu entering Hannibal’s office again. It’s almost more clear this time around; all of his memories just a little bit fuzzy with sickness.

He throws his things on the couch and paces instead of sitting across from Hannibal.

“It is good to see you in this space again, looking much better than last time, I must say.”

Will nods, picking up a small decorative blade on Hannibal’s desk and turning it in the dim light. The fire is already lit and imbues the room with a comfortable warmth.

“Are we also in agreement that I don’t need therapy as much as before either?” Will asks.

“That depends on how you utilize therapy, I suppose. Psychiatric help is not restricted to those who are suffering.”

“I only mean perhaps we can lean more into the conversation side of these appointments. I’m sure you could argue the benefits of therapy into the ground, and of course you have a psychiatrist too.” He gestures casually toward Hannibal. “How was dinner, by the way?”

“It was very nice, thank you for asking. Did you meet Bedelia on your way out?”

“Briefly. I ran before she could get any psychoanalyzing in.”

“It was more likely me she was psychoanalyzing via you, as I have expressed my personal regard for you.”

“How the tables have turned.” Will busies himself putting back the things on Hannibal’s desk that he moved, lining them up precisely. “She knew me right away. What exactly have you told her?”

“I believe she is aware I had no close friends until I saw the potential for friendship in you.”

“Could convince anyone from high class Baltimore and beyond to attend one of your dinner parties but not one person you could call genuinely close.”

“Just so.”

“Until me.”

“Until you.”

“Yeah, the only difference between you and me is I don’t put up with the casual socialization,” Will says. “Yet we have a similar disdain for most people, so maybe you should be following in my footsteps instead.”

Will steps in front of the fireplace and warms his hands. He doesn’t look back when he hears Hannibal rise from his chair and come to stand next to him.

“I can see the thrum of something beneath your flushed skin, fighting its way out.”

Hannibal puts his hands near the fire to mirror Will. Will turns his head away and squeezes his eyes shut, but it doesn’t lessen the feeling that Hannibal can see right through him.

“I have always wanted you to be honest with me, Will,” Hannibal says.

“Have you wanted me to get there on my own, despite how obvious it has probably been to you?”

“Only then would it be fully authentic and without uncertainty. Too early and you may have been consumed by shame.”

Will snorts. “You could have made it easier for me, instead of watching me flop around like a lonely fish. That must get tiring to watch after a while, doesn’t it?”

“I am a patient man, and I always trusted you to sort things out on your own. However, you continue to avoid the topic even now.”

“No help from you, giving me no indication of how you feel.”

Hannibal chuckles. “Is this where your empathy ceases to be effective?”

“Everything is obfuscated by motives and wishful thinking and external associations and I’ve never been able to sort it all out. You *know* that social things are not my strong suit.”

“Not like how you see the death and darkness around us.”

“I’d switch in a heartbeat,” Will says.

“I wouldn’t change a single thing about you.”

Will sighs and then his voice comes out as a mere whisper, like he’s sharing a secret to the light of the fire.

“I can’t stop thinking about you.”

Hannibal is smiling when Will looks to the side, utterly satisfied.

“Me as well,” Hannibal says.

Will nods as he takes that in.

“You know the nature of my feelings for you, don’t you?” Will asks.

“Will, I am telling you that I return your feelings.”

Will takes a deep breath in, reckoning he won’t be in the processing stage for a while now, though his heart has taken on a life of its own in his chest. “Well, what’s to be done about that?” he mumbles, trying and failing to joke.

“Did you have an idea?”

Will nods. He recalls the words running through his mind like a rehearsal on the back of his eyelids all of last night. It didn’t quite feel real then.

“I thought I might cook for a change, balance things out a bit. Would you join me for dinner?”

“When were you thinking?”

“Saturday night? And you can’t be a backseat cook, and go easy on me if you hate it, but I *do* know how to cook some things.”

Hannibal puts his hands up in submission. “I trust you, and I would love to be served by you. When shall I come?”

“Seven?”

“Can I come early and watch you cook? Respectfully, of course.”

“Fine, six.”

Hannibal nods, satisfied. Will taps his fingers together by his thigh where it’s hidden from Hannibal’s view.

“And I thought we could go for a walk after. With the dogs. It gets dark but there’s no danger or anything, it’s actually better not to have a light so the bugs stay away, but I—well, you know I keep the lights on at the house so I can always find my way back.”

“I would love to see your boat across the sea of land. I will bring appropriate wear.”

Will nods once and looks back to the fire.

“It’s a date?” Will asks.

“That would be an honour and a privilege.”

Will just barely holds back from rolling his eyes at the phrase.

“Good. Don’t come to my place as a friend, I really don’t think I can handle that anymore.”

“Dare I ask how you feel about it? Now there really are a lot of things changing in your life,” Hannibal asks.

“We confirmed that they are good changes, so long as I can keep from being overwhelmed. I can manage this, Hannibal.”

“You can, I have full trust in you,” Hannibal repeats, the grin still on his face.

“Hell, get me a glass of wine or something now, I really didn’t know how this would go.”

Hannibal chuckles and squeezes his shoulder briefly before making for his liquor cabinet. He returns in a moment with a red wine for Will and taps their glasses together.

“To the good changes,” he says.

Will smiles more once he leaves the appointment, on the edge of giddy over having actually found someone who, somehow, understands his brand of darkness, has seen his failures and vulnerabilities, and still wants to come be right next to him.

He leaves relatively early, neither of them seeming too eager to talk professionally, and not willing to cross any boundaries yet. Will wants to do things right, and he imagines Hannibal would appreciate it as well.

A bit more fear creeps in and overshadows his glee when he arrives at his home alone in the dark and wonders if Hannibal's principle of valuing his solitude over partnerships will continue. He already warned Will that he has never found anyone worthy of replacing his free time before. Will wonders how willing he is to change for Hannibal. He doesn't want that, though, he wants confidence that they can continue how they are. He wonders if he'll be satisfied with whatever Hannibal gives to him. There's no other choice but to try.

Chapter 9

Chapter Summary

Will cooks Hannibal dinner for their first date together.

Chapter Notes

This was one of my favourite chapters to write, I hope you all enjoy! :)

At noon on Saturday, Will is knee deep in cold water with a couple of beautiful rainbow trout already hooked to his side. The ice has melted just enough for him to wade back into his trusty river and his feet are numb.

He was scared he would have to pull some fish out of his freezer but luck is on his side. He feels good today, thankfully. He thinks he deserves this luck after the last few weeks.

He tires his dogs out in the afternoon by flinging his ball chucker across the fields. Lucky trails behind the big dogs, yapping and growling excitedly, not yet understanding the rules of fetch. She's panting desperately and he hopes it will keep her calm for a few more hours.

He cleans but he doesn't tidy past his own organized disaster, everything in its right place even if it might not be pretty, including a new, yet modest couch placed across from the fireplace. There's little to no chance of his dogs staying off of it so he lays a sheet across it.

He sets out placemats and a holder of paper napkins on the table. At least he has nice wine glasses, he thinks.

It takes him an embarrassingly long time to decide what to wear, going through mental gymnastics about how Hannibal might dress and how he can meet him halfway. Overdressed

seems safer for Hannibal, and his kind of overdressing is underdressing anyway. In the end, he just puts a blazer over his button-up.

Will hears Hannibal's vehicle when he arrives and lets the dogs out to swarm him. Hannibal stares at the ground to avoid tripping over the rambunctious blurs of flesh and Will squints at the bottle of wine and small plant he carries in his arms.

"Is that a venus fly trap?" Will asks, holding the door open. Hannibal slips off his shoes and walks inside like he owns the place until he finds a sunny spot by the kitchen window. Unsurprisingly, he's in a three-piece suit, with a toned down plaid pattern.

He sets down his things and turns to hug Will. Will leans into him.

"A *Dionaea* 'Petite Dragon' venus fly trap, one of the smallest species. Are you knowledgeable about them?" he asks, pulling back.

"Not particularly."

"Water it often. On warmer days it may be fed well by putting it outside, if you don't get too many bugs in here. There's a sweet nectar in the trap that lures in its victims. Did you know there are some carnivorous plants that eat small reptiles and mammals? I reckon they are underestimated. It seems all kinds of species will devour others to derive energy, not to mention the way they absorb the nutrients of each other's corpses to fuel the new generation."

"Uh-huh… Is this your version of first date flowers?" Will asks, amused. Even the reminder that this is a date and not any old visit makes his heart beat faster.

"I thought you would appreciate something more practical and interesting than aesthetic and romantic, though I still find the contrasting colors of this species very pleasing to the eye."

"I do appreciate it more, thank you. It's neat." He sticks a finger in one of the traps and watches it slowly bite down.

“I shouldn’t say flowers are only aesthetic. I am quite interested in Victorian floriography. Do you know what venus fly traps mean?”

“What?”

“‘Caught at Last.’”

“Did I catch you? Sweep you off your feet?”

“Almost. This is merely a date.”

“Ah, I have to keep working to lure you in, then.”

“Speaking of. Trout?” Hannibal asks, breaking in through his nose.

“Of course you can smell it before I even begin cooking. You weren’t kidding about that nose, huh?”

Hannibal opens the fridge and places the bottle of wine inside before leaning in to inspect the fish.

“The Sauvignon Blanc will go well with trout. I’m glad my guess was accurate. We’ll let it chill until dinner.”

“I’m that predictable?”

“Hardly,” Hannibal says, closing the fridge door.

“I hope that bottle of wine costs less than my mortgage payments.”

Hannibal just gives him a small, too-proud smile, and then turns to give the dogs the attention that he deprived them of, kneeling right down to the floor. Will can’t keep the corners of his lips down.

Will starts gathering ingredients, and says, “Before you ask, no I don’t need help.”

“Can I still watch you?”

“Knock yourself out. Maybe if you pet a dog you’ll keep your hands to yourself easier.”

Will chuckles when Hannibal scoops Lucky right up, a thumb wrapped around to scratch behind her ear. He sways not unlike he’s rocking a baby, and only flinches a bit when Lucky tries to lick him.

“You’re good with them. Have you ever had any pets?” Will asks, beginning to cut his red potatoes into halves.

“As a child we had hunting dogs, all hounds. I enjoyed having them around. It’s nice to see you with a proper pack of dogs like my family had.”

“Probably too busy to have them nowadays?”

“Yes, dogs at least. I’ve been considering getting a cat.”

“Have you?”

“Much less time commitment, but the companionship is appealing. You might be rubbing off on me.”

“Just don’t get seven.”

“I think I’ll be able to hold myself back.”

“And if you ever crave some canine company, mine will be here.”

“Thank you. Many reasons to keep coming by. Did your father collect dogs like you?” Hannibal asks.

“This won’t go down the psychoanalysis route, will it?”

“Some of my questions might mimic what I would say in one of our sessions but I have a much different motive here and now. Is it not more pure that I just want to get to know you? All the analyzing I will do will be for selfish reasons, trying to understand you more wholly, and I believe you want to do the same to me.”

“Yeah, you’re right. I’ll try not to be defensive. Yes, I always had dogs. I probably always will. You can’t give me an intervention until I get past double digits.”

“I’ll keep that in mind.” He finally sets down the squirming puppy in his arms, who is growing too excited by the attention to hold still.

Hannibal lets him work quietly for a few minutes. Will tries to ignore the sound of Hannibal straightening and lining things up on his counter space. If all Hannibal wants is his mess in straight lines with equally spaced edges, Will can put up with that.

Will minces garlic and chops herbs to throw into a bowl with the potatoes and a bunch of olive oil. He wouldn’t always bother with fresh herbs but he knows Hannibal is particular. He

wants him to be comfortable as much as he's hoping Hannibal will accept his comparable simplicity.

After spreading the potatoes on a pan and putting it in the oven, Will turns to his fish, cleaning, scaling, and gutting, a routine he could do in his sleep.

Will places his fish on a pan and surrounds it with asparagus before drizzling oil across. He takes his jar of homemade dry rub to season the fish and spreads across more garlic with a heavy hand.

"I am more endeared than I first expected by your plan for our evening," Hannibal says, coming to stand at his shoulder.

"It was purposeful. First I thought about what your ideal date might be, probably expensive and over-the-top, shows and art and culture. If we enjoy tonight maybe you can take me somewhere you'd like, the museum or the opera or the theatre or whatever you like most. I can manage slotting myself into your life, but I need to know if you can manage slotting yourself into mine first."

He slices a lemon thinly and lays it over the fish, with a bit more of an eye for the aesthetics than he usually would have.

"I believe I can manage, especially knowing what I do of you now, and I will be glad to show you in this way. A date should be a test. It's a blind test, we each have expectations and we watch each other closely to see if the other meets those expectations."

Hannibal puts his hand on the center of Will's back until Will moves to put the fish in the oven. Such a simple touch shouldn't feel so intense, but his skin is tingling where Hannibal rested his hand.

"And if you pass you are trusted to get the job," Will says. "A much more stable position with less evaluation, but always the chance of quitting or getting fired."

“You left your job to escape the darkness. I hope I will be more enjoyable.”

“Not the best metaphor perhaps. And I’m only on a break,” he says, wondering internally if he ever will return to the FBI.

“Dating does come with work and expectations, I only hope the benefits are an agreeable payoff. Humans need belonging and love just as they need the means to support their livelihood.”

“It’s a give and take, a negotiation, but still selfish at its core.”

“I want you to recognize me and care for me and you want the same, I presume,” Hannibal agrees.

Will nods and wipes his hands on a tea towel. “Let’s go sit?”

He follows Hannibal to the arm chairs in the living room and tilts his more sideways so it looks less like their chairs in therapy.

“Well if this is like a test, I want to ask for the same thing I asked a while ago,” Will says.

“A show of my vulnerability, and me allowing you to get to know me?”

“Yes. Apparently I can easily forgive the practice of psychoanalysis if it works in my favor with you telling me something vulnerable.”

Hannibal smiles. “Let me think.”

“Take your time, and make it good.”

“I was mute for a few years when I was a child.”

“Was it… something medical?”

“Psychological. A trauma response to losing my family very young, as I told you about previously. My home was suddenly a large orphanage filled with other kids and I could not speak to anyone.”

“I imagine the other kids didn’t take too kindly to that.”

“No. But I never let them bully me.”

Will observes him carefully. “Not an easy feat for a kid who’s different. You had to make them scared of you, become the bully.”

“Yes. I distinctly remember pushing another boy down a hill and hitting him with his own slingshot in front of everyone when he tried to hurl rocks at me and some swans. They were black swans, *Cygnus atratus,* and they were beautiful while the boy was decidedly not.”

Will snorts. “Kids are cruel. Don’t often hear it admitted from the ones that were cruel.”

“Which one were you? The cruel or the targeted?”

“I took it quietly, hoping they would leave me alone. I usually moved on to the next cruel school with the next cruel kids too fast to tell if they ever would have given up,” Will smiles bitterly. “I sure would plan their demise in my head. I knew what they were thinking, I knew how I could have hurt them back.”

“Why didn’t you?”

“I was hoping to keep this topic turned on you.”

“I thought it was quid pro quo, a give and take.”

“I think I’m owed a lot of quo for the quid I’ve given so far.”

Hannibal looks mildly annoyed, but he says, “Fine.”

“I think you’ve always been cruel. Someone doesn’t get to your position and have your demeanor by being mild-natured.”

“I believe I am aware of the cruelty that humans have, less bothered by the confines that polite society tries to place.”

Will squints at him. “It’s why you accept me. You aren’t appalled by darkness because you think it’s everywhere.”

“I know it’s everywhere, and it isn’t me being pessimistic. There is beauty in giving voice to the unmentionable, art has long since been obsessed with depicting the terrors of society, individuals more drawn to it than they will ever admit. Society defined the human monster and then they recreated and memorialized the human monster in art again and again.”

Will wants to disagree but can’t help but believe what Hannibal is saying to be true.

“The Chesapeake Ripper thinks what he is doing is art. He thinks it’s beautiful, murder elevated to the level of art,” Will says.

“And what do you think?”

“I don’t know if I can accept that.”

“Well, what makes something art? What makes something beautiful?”

“I don’t have the knowledge to argue the semantics of art, but innocent people die and that has to be ugly.”

“Is it? Is a martyr ugly? Is a sacrifice ugly? Someone who dies protecting someone, or fighting for what they believe in, are they ugly simply because they are innocent and they are dying?”

Will frowns at him. Hannibal seems to be the only one who can pick apart his words so easily and successfully. Usually he’s the one to do that to other people, and he can understand why others feel so much disdain for him now. He wants to debate back and win, but Hannibal carries on.

“Is it then the cruelty that makes it ugly? An innocent life is beautiful, unless it is lost because it is wasted?”

“Yes. Their lives would be much more beautiful if they had been able to carry on.”

“How do we know their lives would be innocent and beautiful? Is anyone truly innocent? The figure of innocence is fiction, or at the very least, is a newborn baby not yet scathed by the world. Either way, a killer does not consider their kill a waste. They consider it a creation, disorder increasing into something new, something changed.”

“Perspective and all that,” Will mutters weakly. “I’m sorry, this conversation probably isn’t very romantic. I need a much longer break from my job to get my mind on better things. Let me check the fish quickly.”

Will stands up quickly and Hannibal raises his voice to be heard from the kitchen.

“Nonsense, it is an interest of yours and it is an interest of mine, therefore one we can share with pleasure.”

Will dawdles in the kitchen for a few more moments without replying. He doesn’t know why he feels off. They are just having a conversation, and he knows that Hannibal is strange at times. He *likes* that Hannibal is strange; it makes it so there’s less pressure on him to hide his own odd mind. He steps back into the room.

“Nonetheless, we can talk about whatever you’d like,” Hannibal says, as if the conversation never stopped. “Would you like to hear another story, perhaps something lighter?”

Will nods, grateful and wanting Hannibal’s soothing voice to distract him from how his mind is trying to stretch out of his skull unnecessarily. There is no danger. Only his anxiety and the first real hope of a normal relationship he’s seen in a long while.

He listens to Hannibal talk about a few trials and errors during medical school and his internship at John Hopkins, shaping in Will’s mind a young man who was almost humorously ruthless and talented beyond all expectation. Will finds he’s fascinated and amused, the anxiety slipping away until he finds he can revere Hannibal for his unconventional mind. He thinks he can grow to like the challenge that Hannibal’s intellect and strange ideas gives him, and he feels relatively confident that Hannibal wouldn’t judge him for anything.

Before too long, his alarm rings and he divvies their food up on two plates with Hannibal standing right at his shoulder. He seems to have given up any concept of personal space, not that he was ever that considerate before. Will feels stiff and overly aware of their bodies but not in a particularly bad way.

“Why don’t you open the wine?” Will says, so he can breathe a little better and focus on making the plates slightly presentable.

He does feel a bit embarrassed sitting down at his little kitchen table with paper napkins and cheap cutlery. He knows it’s silly. They’ve sat here together countless times before, and

nothing should change just because tonight has a different definition.

He was determined not to be embarrassed tonight. It's why he was purposefully trying not to impress Hannibal.

Will's father was stalwart in his lifestyle, proud of being blue collar and self-reliant and never wasting anything. He had heaps of resentment for the upper class. Will already felt like a traitor when he got a professional degree, but now he feels silly for not living the professional lifestyle he has the money for.

Will doesn't ever care what people think, but suddenly he's biting back an apology trying to worm its way out. An apology for what, he isn't sure. His lack of decor, his basic cooking skills, himself?

He has a moment of stifling self awareness. He's on a date with *Hannibal*. He felt enough desire for Hannibal that he could push himself to ask. Now, stepping back, he realizes how strange it is. Cultured, successful, and put-together Hannibal Lecter. Hannibal is attractive and impressive in every way he can think of, and Will is… rather caught in his own ways.

He's still worried that this doesn't mean as much to Hannibal as it does to Will. That Hannibal will keep him at arm's length and leave when it's not interesting enough anymore.

He watches Hannibal take a bite without moving to eat himself. He recognizes the regal handsomeness and beauty he usually tries not to pay attention to in men. Hannibal's beauty screams out to him, impossible to ignore. He watches Hannibal chew the fish slowly and thoughtfully and feels like far too much is riding on this one simple meal.

"Mm. The fish is delicious. You caught it today, didn't you? It isn't often I get to try fish so fresh from a natural environment. A subtle, nutty flavour and a good amount of citrus." He takes another bite. "I bet I can guess what your dry rub is made up of. It's very good, perhaps even perfected."

"I do know my fish," Will says. "Even if it's simple."

“Simple is far superior sometimes. This fish speaks for itself. I haven’t let anyone cook for me in years but I do not regret this.”

“I’m glad you didn’t tell me that before. I would have crumbled under the pressure,” Will says.

“No reason to. Food is about trust above anything. Is something bothering you, Will?”

Will shakes his head quickly. “No,” he says, finally scooping up a bite of fish to try. It’s great, of course. He could make this meal with his eyes closed.

“Will you continue on with your stories?” Will asks, hoping his desperation for a distraction isn’t evident in his tone. It reminds him that encephalitis was only one small thing in the world of his mental health. He’s never been particularly stable. He pours them both wine and tries to casually drink half of his glass at once.

“Of course,” Hannibal says, reaching out to squeeze Will’s hand before filling the air with his voice, picking up where he left off.

When their plates are scraped clean and their hands more occupied by their wine glasses, Will says, “All of these stories seem to be from two, three decades ago. School and internships and moving to America, nothing more recent.”

“Hm. I suppose they have been.” Hannibal takes another sip.

“That’s a length of time so significant that someone can be an entirely different person, I reckon.”

Hannibal finally puts down his glass and seems to think for a moment.

“I have learned more, experienced more, and created more in those coming decades. But I also believe I became content, found stability. Less stories of growth to tell.”

“Contentedness might be a fine line from stagnation.”

Hannibal looks stiff where he sits and looks out the window.

“I’m sure filling your days with things keeps life from feeling banal, but I wonder how much you have actually changed and evolved in this time.”

When Hannibal’s tense silence continues, Will says, “Did I manage to sufficiently enact revenge by finally making you uncomfortable by psychoanalyzing you?”

“While the discomfort is real, I am proud that you did. You found the root of a vulnerability in what I hadn’t said instead of what I had said.”

Will smiles proudly and lifts the wine bottle to pour what is left into each of their glasses.

“It feels good to catch one of my vulnerabilities, doesn’t it?” Hannibal asks.

“Do you think I’m being cruel?”

“No more than I am when I’m trying to figure people out.”

Will smiles. He reckons that means it’s cruel.

“It feels good because I know I’m not the only one who is not entirely put together. Admittedly, I come across as a bit more of a mess than you do… ” He smiles to himself, entirely aware that the wine is making him feel comparably more giggly. “Hell, I’ve been

half-dead most of the time you've been visiting here. And I found myself subconsciously searching for something that made you less… perfect."

"You thought I was perfect before?"

"Perfectly composed," Will amends.

"And in all other areas?" Hannibal smiles in such a purposeful, teasing way that he must know how charming it makes him look.

Will tilts his head back and forth as if weighing the idea in his head, and turns his eyes away from the smile.

"You seem great in a lot of ways, but I know you're not."

"No?"

"Everyone's got problems. I just can't seem to hide any of mine very well. But the more I think about it, the more I'm not sure if you're actually very happy."

"Hm," Hannibal says, sounding almost distracted.

"You can be short with me all you want, as long as you put up with me trying to find your insecurities. It will actually make me like you *more*. I don't want to feel like a mess vying for the attention of Mr. Normal. Not that you're very *normal*, but people still see you that way. Somehow."

Hannibal smiles. "No, you're right. I suppose it can feel as endangering as it is enticing to be seen by another. Not too long ago I actually saw myself reflected in one of my patients and it was not a feeling I enjoyed."

“What was wrong with your patient?”

“He was very lonely, always vying for the attention of another.” Hannibal looks down into his wine glass, almost shy.

Will thinks back on the last few weeks, when Hannibal continued to show up at his place despite his excuse of assisting with Will’s recovery crumbling more and more by the day. Did he start to come less frequently because he didn’t need to anymore, or because he didn’t have as much of an excuse to hide behind? Was it ever a sense of obligation to turn up at Will’s place, or had he just wanted to be close?

Will reaches across the table to pick up Hannibal’s hand and pull it closer, feeling bolder. He rubs a thumb over the veins on the back of his hand.

He chuckles, a bit self-deprecatingly. “I mean, you’re not alone in that. Definitely not.”

Hannibal turns his hand over to hold Will’s hand properly and Will likes how they fit together.

Hannibal helps him with dishes after dinner and they both peer out the window trying to gauge the cold of the night. It’s hard to even see the line of the trees.

“Not going to be scared of the woods at night?” Will asks. He has a calm buzz from the wine at dinner.

“Zoe will protect me.”

Will snorts. “Sure she will.”

“Are we going now?”

“Wait. For our second and final course I have a gourmet dessert.” Will grabs a tin container from the other counter and opens it to reveal coconut macaroons with maraschino cherries on top.

“You bake?”

“If I get a craving,” he smiles as Hannibal takes one.

“I’m going to put you to work for the next dinner at my house. You’ll make a fine sous-chef.”

“Glad I could prove my worth.”

“You already had,” Hannibal says. “I brought some casual clothes for the walk, I’ll need to change.”

“Good. The woods will provide no insurance for that suit,” Will says, trying to imagine what casual is to Hannibal. “I’d better dress down, too.”

As it turns out, casual for Hannibal is reasonable. High quality exercise pants and a nice sweater. The fabric is tight enough that Will’s gaze lingers on when he’s not looking, questioning his own attraction and finding the answer to still be confidently in the affirmative. He has the sudden urge to dress Hannibal in his own clothes to see how he looks, but he pushes that thought away before he gets too distracted.

The dogs run out the door with purpose and go in the direction they are used to, with the exception of Lucky stuck on her leash so she doesn’t run off. Will smiles weakly as he falls in

step with Hannibal, walking away from the warm glow of his little farm house and stepping into the darkness of the forest.

They're quiet aside from the crunching of their feet and heavy breathing. Will keeps his eyes on the dogs, swarming and exploring. Winston stays close to his side and Lucky tugs on the leash.

He's nervous for other reasons now. He's never so much as told someone about this strange habit before Hannibal, let alone dragged anyone out into the cold, dark woods to see it.

He slows by the big oak tree and busies his hands by tying Lucky up on a low branch. He turns back and Hannibal is facing him, though it's hard to see his expression.

Will gestures to the side. "Well. My little boat on the sea."

Hannibal nudges his arm so they both turn and look, quiet for a few agonizing moments as Will waits for some kind of reaction.

"It's beautiful. I didn't expect the fog rolling like waves, and such warm lighting beckoning home."

Will nods.

"Will you tell me why you wanted to show me?"

"You can't just psychoanalyze it out of me?" Will asks.

"I want to hear it from you."

Will gulps, turning to look at the scene for a few moments longer. It helps to calm him, thankfully. “I… wanted to somehow tell you how you make me feel. I come here more than I’d like to admit, and I imagine myself on the shore, just a few steps away from drowning. It’s a kind of escapism, or as close I can get to turning it… off,” Will points at his head and leans back against the tree.

“My head quiets when I’m with you. Not always, but it seems with enough time or attention, it helps. But it’s *not* because you’re my psychiatrist, trust me. It feels like you’re on the same side of the world as me, looking out at all the people that are exhausting and annoying and always *battering* around in my head. That’s it, I guess. I want you next to me, because I feel like you understand me, and I feel like I can understand you. Just like you said. And how you make me feel is… safe, and accepted. And good. I feel good when I’m with you.”

Will gulps back a lump in his throat that’s grown far too big. His heart is running away from him inside his chest and he doesn’t remember the last time he felt so goddamn vulnerable.

“Do you feel it, too? Or is it just me?” Will asks quietly.

Hannibal comes a bit closer so their arms press together as they look out at the house together.

“Truthfully, I hadn’t realized I craved companionship until I observed the potential with you. I care about you, in some ways that feel rather inconvenient, but I find I’m not that bothered. I would like to be on the same side of the world as you.”

Will lets out his breath and nods his head.

Hannibal turns and cups the side of his face, stroking Will’s cheek with his thumb.

“Thank you for showing me this side of you, this spot on the edge of your sea of darkness,” Hannibal says. “If this is what quiets your mind into peace, then let us walk into that sea together. I find I want to let you in just as you have let me in. I haven’t wanted anyone to see me so honestly since my sister. One day, Will, if you are patient and win my trust, I will give you all of me.”

Hannibal sounds serious, dispelling some of Will's worries and dislodging that lump in his throat.

"I want to see you." Will tugs Hannibal around so they face each other. Hannibal leans into him, pressing Will's back into the tree trunk, and Will holds him there firmly.

"I will give you that gift then, I promise," Hannibal says, his fingers moving higher up into Will's hair, tugging.

He's happy that he can see the reflection of Hannibal's eyes in this closeness. He's happy he finds honesty in those eyes.

"Good," Will whispers, and grabs the fabric of Hannibal's jacket to tug him closer insistently. "I want it. I want you." After tugging Hannibal so close, it only takes another inch or two to press his lips to Hannibal's.

Will closes his eyes right before Hannibal opens Will's mouth with his own, kissing him deeper.

Will sighs against him. Stubble scratches against his own and he thinks he can taste the maraschino cherry along with Hannibal's usual, comforting smell. They kiss slowly, learning how each other moves and Will feels almost dizzy with disbelief that this is happening. Hannibal is a good kisser and it pushes the experience to the edge of overwhelming.

He's been wanting to do this for weeks, and it feels good enough to make it all worth it. It's shockingly real compared to all of his fantasies. He holds onto Hannibal's back, squeezing through the fabric to remind himself of the solid body underneath.

He finally breaks off from the kiss but keeps his face pressed against Hannibal's. They catch their breaths for a moment and he blinks to catch sight of Hannibal's small smile. It's reassuring.

He lets his chin settle down and looks out at the scene over Hannibal's shoulder; his little house that looks just like his father's boat if he stares long enough that his vision starts to blur and shift. He's stood here alone so many times before, often with a glass of whiskey or shivering in nothing but his underwear or patting at an aspirin bottle in his pocket. Hannibal relaxes against him, pressing him into the tree with comforting weight.

Will's eyes grow heavy and his lips turn up at the edges with contentment. This isn't some silly thing for Hannibal and he feels so damn happy about that fact.

They stand for a long while, pressed tight hands running over clothing and heads bumping together affectionately. It's nice in the dark where his heated cheeks can't be seen.

Eventually, the dogs start panting restlessly and Will feels himself shiver. Hannibal is dressed in even less layers than he is. Will sighs, his chest expanding against Hannibal's body.

He kisses Hannibal again, a bit timidly with hands on either side of his face, and then pulls back to grab Lucky.

"Come on, let's go back."

They walk back to the house, brushing against each other.

The yellow light of the porch shines on their faces and Will feels exposed. He's sure his red face is already visible and he can't quite meet Hannibal's gaze.

"Can I get you another drink?" Will asks when he gets all the dogs in.

Hannibal shakes his head. Will frowns where he can't see. Hannibal has a long drive home, and he probably won't stay much longer. It might be for the best, Will needs more time to process everything too. Hannibal doesn't offer an excuse. Instead, he leads Will to the couch

and sits, thighs touching. He leans in like he's going in for another kiss, but then sticks his nose against the top of Will's neck, nudging his hair, and breathes in deeply. Will stays still, confused.

"There is still a trace of your feverishly sweet smell," Hannibal says fondly.

"That's good?"

"Like your brain is on fire, it's overwhelming," he says, which doesn't really answer Will's question. "In some ways, I miss it."

Will doesn't know what to say to that but Hannibal starts kissing his neck so he gives up and closes his eyes until Hannibal makes his way up his jaw and kisses him on the mouth again.

"I've been waiting to taste you," Hannibal says, and Will doesn't know if the chills he gets are from his words or the hands moving up his back. He kisses Will and doesn't stop kissing him.

Hannibal pushes him to lay back on the couch, lying between his legs and leaning his warm weight into Will's chest, indulgent and firm. Will lets his mouth go lax to slip their tongues together, instinctively biting his lip when it gets too much. It makes Hannibal press down harder on him.

He feels not unlike he's on the sea, drifting further and further into his mind as his body is rocked by the current. Everything feels hot and he's not entirely certain if it's his fever flaring up again or the effect that Hannibal has on him.

Hannibal stops kissing him after what he's sure is much longer than it feels and they both breathe heavily into each other's mouths. Hannibal strokes his face and smiles and Will knows what's coming.

"I am going home now," Hannibal says.

“Okay,” he replies, but Hannibal leans down to kiss him again, on his lips and down his jaw and Will squirms. Hannibal’s hair has fallen completely loose from the gel and fans across his forehead as he leans over Will. Will holds him tight like it might stop him from leaving, even though he’s fighting unconsciousness himself. He definitely wouldn’t object to Hannibal coming into his bed, but Hannibal seems to be avoiding that. He might have different standards.

Will should be grateful for some alone time but he knows he’s going to miss Hannibal.

Hannibal finally pushes himself off and stands up and Will sighs at the lack of warmth covering him. He sits up and fixes the sweater that has twisted around his torso and ridden up slightly. He feels excessively messy for something as simple as a slow makeout session, like even the few steps to the door is a walk of shame.

Hannibal pushes his hair out of his face and asks, “Did I pass the test?”

Will cracks a smile, fixing his own hair. “It’s a long test, but so far you’re passing with flying colors.” His voice sounds rough.

Hannibal takes the time to say goodbye to his dogs and Will watches them fondly.

Will opens the door for him and Hannibal pulls him in by the waist, his handsy assertiveness much more intense than when they had been platonic.

“Are you going to take me out next, then?” Will asks, rubbing his palms against Hannibal’s biceps.

“Of course, if you will do me the honors.”

“Of course I’ll do you the honors,” Will says, mimicking his accent.

Hannibal smiles, half annoyed and half amused.

“Are you going to make me go to the opera? Or the theatre? Maybe a cocktail party?” Will asks, tugging at the lapels of his jacket.

“Are you free Tuesday morning?” Hannibal asks against his ear.

“I’m free always.”

“Good. Meet me in Baltimore?”

Will lets him tug free without prying into the plans. He watches Hannibal leave into the dark night. His car pulls further and further away and his dogs stick their heads between his legs to watch.

He tries very hard to focus on the *next time* when he curls up in bed and finds he can fall asleep better than he has in months.

Chapter 10

Chapter Summary

Date number 2 electric boogaloo: sexual frustration edition

Will wakes up and considers pinching himself to confirm that the date wasn't all a dream, and then he considers hitting himself because of how cliche that is to even think.

He still gets out of bed with a new pep in his step. He lets his dogs out and he breathes in the fresh air easier than before. His simple coffee and toast hit the spot. He doesn't know what to do with himself other than stew in his happiness.

Will tried, whether subconsciously or not, to level out his expectations for the date and not hold them to achieving any kind of milestone of success, but now his levels of self-preservation seem silly. It was *good.* They go good together, he feels it in his bones.

He sets his coffee down and lays across the couch in the same place he was last night. He can almost feel the spot where Hannibal was above him last night, atoms vibrating faster than anywhere else, a warm mirage in its place. He closes his eyes and sighs, all of the pleasurable sensations of them kissing and being so close coming back to him.

Lucky jumps up with her two front paws on the couch and Will lifts her the rest of the way. She licks at his face and wiggles against him and he works hard to get her cradled more calmly against his chest. When she does calm, she flops down, sated with the contact.

She loves Hannibal too. That feels like a good confirmation.

Most of the dates he had when he was younger consisted of driving to secluded areas for a few scandalous and awkward hours, while the dates he had when he was a bit older were in the bright light of an afternoon coffee shop and mostly just awkward. It's never felt as

fulfilling as it did last night, like each second that passed was more proof of things falling into place, right where they should be.

He might be overly dramatic about it, but he *has* known Hannibal for months now, even if they weren't as close at the start. They met in the fall when the trees were vibrant and the air was almost as chilly as it is now with the hint of spring threatening to overtake their cold winter. It's been months since Will first assumed he would hate the prickly doctor and then was charmed by him in their next meeting.

It took a long time, but maybe there was always something there, some feeling below the surface. Some reason that he always seemed to turn up at Hannibal's when he lost time.

Whatever it is, he can now show up at Hannibal's willingly and have him how he wants to.

Their date on Tuesday is not so subtle, but Will still smiles as he looks at the line of sailboats in the harbourfront during their chilly walk along the Patapsco river downtown in Baltimore.

Hannibal passes Will some fresh pastries and thermos coffee when they find a nice bench. Will beckons for Winston to lay down by his feet so he doesn't beg. Hannibal suggested that *one* dog would be a nice addition to their day. Will would love to show Lucky more of the world, but Winston is more obedient.

"Does this mean the opera stuff is all a farce? You just want to go look at boats on a date?" Will asks.

"Patience, Will. But I do prefer to be somewhere private with you for the time being."

"Private with only dozens of other people around," Will says, staring at the people walking past them.

“Where there is no obligation to talk to anyone else. I have my social circle at the opera house. Here, we are invisible in the crowd.”

Hannibal reaches out and fixes Will’s collar that’s peeking out from under his sweater. He seems to have no reservations or boundaries when it comes to casual touch, whether it’s putting Will’s hair into place or fixing his clothes or pulling him along where he wants to go. Will takes it passively, not entirely sure about how he feels being affectionate with Hannibal in front of other people, especially by the boatyard. This is not something he could imagine seeing when he lived in boatyards as a young man. This is different, though, decades have passed and here they sit in a progressive major city. Theoretically, he doesn’t give a single fuck, but in actuality, he feels stiff. He’s just never needed to think about these things before.

“Did—” Will starts, but then feels unsure about what he’s asking.

“Yes?” Hannibal looks at him curiously, and moves a curl that was apparently out of place.

“I know the typical metaphor is ‘coming out of the closet’ and I was about to ask if you have done that, but I am not so certain about how much you let your social circles see you, or how you even consider yourself. I don’t know how to ask this question with any tact and without letting my assumptions slip in, so let me just say that I am curious… about you, and how you think of us.”

“Ah, like am I worried about us being two men? It is fair of you to ask, but no that metaphor does not resonate very much.” He looks amused.

“No?”

“My opinions are quite particular.”

“Tell me. I’m curious.” He’s surprised by how much he suddenly wants to know, having never let himself think about these things.

“Are you familiar with Michel Foucault’s *The History of Sexuality*?”

“Not those ones, no.”

“I will try to keep this brief so as not to turn this into a lecture, but what he did in the first volume is trace the emergence of *scientia sexualis* across the Age of Enlightenment and following into the Industrial Revolution and the spark of the Victorian era. In this time of great knowledge and in prioritizing rationality and order, sexuality was soon rendered a topic under law and under science, and people sought to discover the *why* of the avoidable elusiveness of sexuality in scientific institutions just as they had in the church.”

“Oh, you mean the new authoritative institution wasn’t less oppressive than the last?” Will asks sarcastically.

Hannibal smiles fondly and fiddles with Will’s collar once more before continuing.

“Sexuality became a necessary facet of a person, no longer merely a person that sodomizes but an essential, irredeemable *sodomite* at their core, and similarly in the scientific conception, sexuality was no longer something that a person did but something that they were.”

“I see.”

“I believe this conception stifled something that is too close to our deepest, basal natures to be defined so narrowly. Sexuality and gender have always been expressed in ambiguous ways with humans trying their hardest to indulge their pleasures, whether it was the power dynamic in the Ancient Greek *pederasty* or the various roles in Ancient Rome.”

“Right, yeah. I have come across some of the stories, but I never really looked it up. That wouldn’t have aided in my hard work to repress and repress, Doctor,” he jokes, happy that Hannibal looks understanding.

“We may discuss more later, at our next dinner perhaps, but what I mean to say now is that I do not wish to define my sexuality in simple terms. I believe one must get in touch with their own pleasures and their own nature external to any scientific or religious definition of their condition. I have never been concerned with the morals of anyone else and, to put it simply, I care far more about experiencing the beauty I see in the world. You might say I never wanted to restrict myself from any kind of beauty, and that includes beautiful humans. Humans were made to pleasure themselves and pleasure each other, when they so please, and I do not wish to place any boundaries on myself, nor do I wish to explain myself to anyone.”

“You shouldn’t have to.”

Hannibal leans in, grinning. “Although, if you were more sociable, you may have heard of the rumors of my affairs. It seems they make their way around some social circles in Baltimore. I hear I am a household name in the Baltimore Men’s Chorus, and not for my donations.”

Will forces out a short laugh to cover up a sneer, instantly hating the thought of Hannibal having affairs with anyone else before him.

“It gives people something interesting to discuss when their lives are otherwise drab, I suppose,” Hannibal says.

“How trite,” Will mutters.

“Indeed.”

Will busies his hands by sipping some coffee. He can’t be this bothered that Hannibal had partners before him. It only feels like Hannibal should be his, and that no one else should be able to compare, especially not other men. Not any of those drab humans that could only pretend to understand Hannibal.

Hannibal might have found people he has connected with before, but Will hasn’t, not really.

“What I mean to say is that sexuality is much like violence,” Hannibal continues. “It is art. It is pain. It is the representation of our deepest desires. Only few allow themselves to truly live in that realm, and I have never wished to stifle myself in that regard.”

Will turns away and looks at the boatyard instead of Hannibal. A hand sinks into his hair at the back of his head and Will closes his eyes in pleasure at the sensation.

“All we have in life is time—time until we die, until which there is always the opportunity to become something else. Our greatest potential, that is, the greatest potential for *pleasure*,” Hannibal says. Will nods, making Hannibal’s fingers catch on his curls. It sends a shiver down his spine.

He grins at Hannibal, trying not to look sad. “You’re right. We’re here now, and I don’t want to dwell on old regrets.”

“Do you have many?”

“I feel riddled with regrets,” Will says quietly. He feels like he has deprived himself his entire life. It feels like he’s been without water forever.

“We will erase as many as we can,” Hannibal whispers, kissing Will next to his ear.

On top of the sudden anxiety, Will feels overwhelmed for another reason. The thought of having sex with Hannibal—*really* having sex with him, no longer confined to safe and indulgent fantasies—has entered his mind and rooted itself in his skull, those tendrils sinking deep into his body, circling his ribs and squeezing his gut. From Hannibal’s words alone, an image of how Hannibal might be in bed is starting to form in his mind, filling in the pieces from his demeanor and philosophy. The feeling of his hands on him is already a bit overwhelming. Will crosses his legs discreetly.

He wishes they were at one of their homes, somewhere that Will could get out his frustrations and indulge in pushing Hannibal against some surface. Any surface. He’s not picky.

Except Hannibal might be.

Hannibal smiles knowingly at him and Will isn't too bothered. He stares back at Hannibal with glassy eyes over his thermos.

"Tell me more. I wanna hear your stories," Will says. Hannibal's soothing voice is just a bonus.

He gives into his impulse and squeezes one hand around Hannibal's thigh. Hannibal shoots him a satisfied grin and continues speaking.

They take a walk downtown after, seemingly innocuous until Hannibal stops in front of a shop and waits for Will to notice.

Will raises one eyebrow, offering no guess.

"You said you think you can fit into my world," Hannibal says. "I do very much want to introduce you to my world and bring you to the opera for starters."

Will gestures in a circular motion with his hand, already seeing where this is going. "Okay, get on to your point."

"Although dress codes have relaxed in modern times, I would love for you to wear a fitted tuxedo alongside me."

Will looks at the suits on display through the window. "I'll get one, just this store might be a bit out of my price range. But I'll get one soon, okay?"

Hannibal puts a hand on his shoulder. “I only brought you here to get a professional measurement. Something quick, with a friend that I know and trust.”

“Oh, alright. I guess fitting into your world means fitting into my suits, too,” Will says. He finds a bike rack nearby that he loops Winston’s leash around and leads him to sit out of the way of the sidewalk.

“Good boy, Winston. I’ll be quick,” Will whispers.

He follows Hannibal into the store and skims the racks to avoid the unnecessary small talk that Hannibal starts up with the owner. He looks up when the man says his name and shakes his hand. He follows them into the back where a row of mirrors loops around the room, leaving not a single spot where he can avoid looking at himself, underdressed and out of his element.

He watches Hannibal come up behind him but still stiffens at the hand on his lower back. Lower than is typically acceptable for a casual touch, he thinks.

“Take off your coat and sweater,” Hannibal says. Will undresses, not bothering to move away from him, and Hannibal takes them from him so Will can step into the middle of the room in a button-up that is much tighter against his skin.

The tailor is quick and professional and Will barely notices him. He notices Hannibal, though, watching him not unlike he’s an animal in a cage. Hannibal starts to circle him, stalking, and Will suddenly isn’t sure if he’s the animal in this metaphor. His gaze feels exhibitionistic and Will takes great care to stay still while Hannibal’s eyes move over him like a physical sensation.

The tailor measures the rise of his pants with the measuring tape between his legs and Will stiffens and tries to think of anything else but Hannibal and having sex with Hannibal. He closes his eyes and internally runs through the step-by-step procedure he used to write his monograph on the time of death by insect activity until he gets to the part where he put maggots in vials to preserve them and all of a sudden the measuring is done and he hasn’t humiliated himself by getting an erection in this fancy Baltimore suits store.

He thanks the tailor and then steps away to pull his sweater back on.

When he turns back, Hannibal says, “You can go wait with your dog, I’ll get your measurements.”

“I still have to pay.”

“He’s a friend, Will.”

Will hesitates, then says, “Oh.” He thanks the man again and doesn’t waste any time in leaving and going outside to retrieve Winston and wait on the street.

He watches Hannibal through the window, doing something at the front desk that he can’t see with his back turned. Will wonders if he lied so he could pay for Will, but it sounds unnecessarily paranoid to even ask so he turns away and watches the traffic go by until Hannibal comes out again.

When he says goodbye before Hannibal has to get back to his appointments, Will steps in and kisses him goodbye in the middle of the street. It’s not an obnoxious kiss, just a lingering press of his lips half hidden behind a streetlight. Will didn’t want to go another few days without tasting Hannibal.

He only sees Hannibal once in the following week, when Hannibal turns up at Will’s and they cook dinner together. Hannibal gets Will dangerously close to cardiac arrest when he sends flames shooting up from his stove. The dogs all go and hide in the other room, but it turns out delicious and Will has no complaints by the time he’s able to pull Hannibal to the couch and kiss him. He leans his side into the back of the couch and lets Hannibal’s stubble tickle the palm of his hand as he licks into Hannibal’s mouth, tasting their meal.

He missed being touched more than he realized. Every bit of skin that Hannibal touches feels sensitive. He hasn’t had an affair or relationship since his time on the police force, after

which he gave up on all forms of social interaction and embraced his reputation of anti-social, untouchable professor. He never liked one-night stands, either. He learned too much about people when he was searching for strangers.

Will shifts closer until their thighs are pressed together, practically overlapping, and moves a hand to Hannibal's chest to unbutton the top of his shirt and pull his tie loose. He presses his hand against furry chest hair and updates the fantasy of Hannibal in his head immediately.

When Will moves in to kiss him again, he misses. He opens his eyes against Hannibal's hair and sees Hannibal leaning over to grab his whiskey. Will goes for his throat while Hannibal drinks.

"I had a question for you," Hannibal says.

"Mm?"

"It may take an ounce more focus than this." Hannibal guides Will's head up to make eye contact, and then starts stroking through Will's hair. "Tell me, during our date did I provide enough quo for your quid?" Hannibal asks.

Will stares at him blankly, his mind fully preoccupied with imagining Hannibal out of his suit and on his bed. He lets go of the wrinkling grip he has on Hannibal's collar and smooths it out. "What?" he mumbles.

"Do you recall when you asked for me to share more about myself during our first date?"

Will raises one eyebrow, amused. "What is it?" he says.

"I asked you a question the other day and it hung in the air, refused and incomplete. I have been wondering about it since. I don't enjoy being left unanswered."

Will rolls his eyes, not bothering to hide his annoyance, but he leans back on the couch, pulling one of Hannibal's legs over his to touch his thigh, hoping he can convince Hannibal to focus on something else. He thinks that's probably a difficult feat. "What was the question?"

"We concluded that I was a cruel child, but not why you avoided cruelty despite the ability to hurt your bullies."

"Is this supposed to be a sexy conversation?"

"It's tamer than what most of our conversations are at any time of day before. I didn't expect our topics of conversation to change with our new dynamic, did you?"

"Kind of."

"Why? Because a romantic relationship is supposed to be sweet? Niceties shared back and forth?"

"Obviously not." He looks away, annoyed at the suddenly condescending tone.

"You should know, I'm not particularly tied to conventions, or interested in keeping polite conversation."

"I'm not either," Will says defensively. "You really like to ask the hard questions to get to know me, huh?"

"I think it's best to get to the meat of things."

"Of course you do," Will says, squeezing Hannibal's thigh and leaning in to kiss Hannibal's neck. His insides squirm everytime he gets close. When Hannibal speaks, his skin vibrates against Will's lips.

“Like sex, violence also has its part in shame. People avoid intimacy and conflict out of a similar fear of their desires being exposed.”

Will sighs, pulling back and conceding that Hannibal isn’t likely to let this go. “I fought sometimes.”

“Did you?”

“Early on, yeah. I was small and got hurt but always kept on fighting.”

“When was it that you fought?”

“Defending others,” he smiles shyly.

“The times you made friends?”

“Most of the friends I made were ants and worms that I would find outside. But yes, the few times I found other weirdos, I was protective.”

“I can see your decision to become a police officer. To choose who to save.”

“You don’t *choose* who to save as a police officer.”

Hannibal grins. “Of course you do.”

Will hesitates. “Fine. I’m not going to vouch for the ethics of police officers or the sanctity of the justice system. I saw what went on. I tried to be a good one, though you can probably

guess how that went."

"You had to leave."

"I despised it, working in those incompetent teams. I only stayed so long because I needed the field experience and money. I was alongside cruel men instead of catching them, and their cruelty was ugly."

Hannibal smiles. "But the FBI was more appealing?"

Will runs a hand through Hannibal's hair, tugging on the soft strands. "It was murderers I wanted to catch."

Will sneaks his other hand further and further up Hannibal's inner thigh but doesn't quite reach where he wants to.

Hannibal questions him on his time as a detective and how Will cycled through partners because he was so purposefully off-putting to make them leave him alone, and about the time he fucked up his rotator cuff getting stabbed because he couldn't bring himself to shoot. Hannibal rubs soothingly at his shoulder in response.

Will would do it differently if he were in that position now, but mostly he's sorely grateful to be gone from that line of work. He can recognize the depressed state he was in during those years in hindsight, especially when he compares it to now.

At least there's something that makes him feel alive these days, he thinks, pulling closer to Hannibal and resting his increasingly tired head on Hannibal's shoulder. The difference of having something to look forward to is tremendous. He gets lost in his thoughts and their conversation about the unused power he held being in the line of duty, just like the power that came into fruition the day he shot Garret Jacob Hobbs.

When his eyes start to grow heavy, Hannibal scratches his scalp and his back with blunt nails and Will grows unable to form words. Every millimeter of skin that Hannibal touches feels sensitive and goosebumps rise in response. He curls in closer, frustrated that it's awkward on the couch. He never realized the extent that he craved closeness until now that he is receiving it from Hannibal. It feels like he would do anything to keep this affection. He drifts off into a state between sleep and awake, focusing his mind only on the nice sensations.

Finally, Hannibal kisses his neck, wet and warm, and Will uses the last of his energy to crawl on top of Hannibal to show his interest, kneeling over his thighs and looking down at him.

Hannibal grasps his hips—and then gently pushes him back to the couch. Will blinks wearily at him.

"You need your sleep, and so do I. It's a long drive ahead of me, I must take my leave."

Will holds on tighter but Hannibal pulls away, and Will finds it's harder to resist the comfort of the cushions below him. He closes his eyes. A minute later, he feels the cold enter through the open front door and only makes it to his bed because of the temptation of his blankets. He still feels colder than he did when Hannibal was next to him.

Chapter 11

Chapter Summary

As Will and Hannibal progress in their relationship, Will starts to wonder why Hannibal hasn't slept with him yet.

Will is hard when he wakes and it’s only then that he remembers just how purposefully Hannibal had distracted him before things turned too heated and then left him alone. He doesn’t think it will be satisfying to do anything about it now, so he just rolls out of bed and turns on the coffee, hoping it will help his sour mood.

Most of his relationships, although young and short, moved rather fast, and they didn’t even have the benefit of a trustworthy friendship before dating. Prudishness doesn’t fit with what he knows of Hannibal. Will doesn’t know why Hannibal didn’t take him up on his clear interest to sleep together.

He doesn’t want to entertain the thought that Hannibal just doesn’t desire him or his inexperience all that much, but it slips into his head anyway. Hannibal might want to be seduced in a more extravagant way, but that goes against his promise to fit into Will’s world. And in Will’s world, he mostly just wants to be able to invite Hannibal over and get laid for the first time in a number of years that he doesn’t want to count. He can’t exactly say that without sounding like an asshole.

He is just far too aware that his sexual frustration has amassed what feels like eons of build up and he worries Hannibal, wrapped up in a million layers of fabric and a hint of dark cologne, might just push him over the edge of his patience.

He whips up some scrambled eggs and pushes them around a pan with a spatula as he calls Hannibal.

“Hello, Will.” Hannibal pauses. “I hear cooking, what have you decided on this morning?”

Will pushes his phone into the crook between his jaw and shoulder and grabs his loaf of bread to cut. “A delicacy I like to call eggs and toast.”

“A classic.”

“You’ve influenced me. I haven’t used my stove this much in a long time.”

“Or eaten breakfast at all for many years, have you?”

“Does coffee count as breakfast?”

“No.”

“How about three coffees?”

“I’m very glad you’re giving your body more sustenance, Will.”

“You seem very concerned with me eating enough. Ever read Hansel and Gretel?”

Hannibal chuckles. “I wouldn’t fatten you up. I would enjoy you lean.”

“Would you enjoy me?” Will asks, a bit bitterly.

“What do you mean?”

“You know you can stay here, right? That’s an insane drive home in the middle of the night.”

“I don’t mind the drive. It’s nice to clear my head and think.”

“You can clear your head and think while cuddled up next to me in bed, too.”

“Are you in some kind of mood, Will?”

Will sighs, pulling the pan off the burner and tilting it until the eggs fall onto his plate with a splat. He starts to dig in while standing at the counter. “Sorry. If I call you before I’ve drank enough coffee you can just hang up on me.”

“I like to experience all your moods. Right now I just can’t tell if you’re trying to flirt with me or bicker with me.” Hannibal sounds amused, so Will thinks neither has made an impact in any sense.

“Yeah, me neither. Forget it. What are you doing today?”

“My patient canceled so I agreed to drop by the BHSCI and help with a profile later.”

“Oh, you’re still going there?”

“Jack asks me even more frequently than before you left. I feel a bit like the new Will Graham. I have a rare opportunity to see the world through your eyes.”

“Well, knock yourself out. I don’t want to be him.”

“I am happy to help out, but I’d like to keep my boundaries.”

“Yeah, unlike I did.”

“I do not wish to be exploited and overworked in the way that you were, no. I can empathize with how persuasive Jack can be all the more.”

“He’s doing what he thinks is best,” Will concedes.

“He has a strong sense of justice, stronger than his own need for comfort.”

“Or anyone else’s, at times.”

“He likely wouldn’t hold this position if he didn’t.”

“It’s arguably effective, with the right workers to push around. How are things there?”

“Your absence is felt.”

Will feels the first tendrils of missing his work. Mostly because Beverly might have been a good friend had he met her under different circumstances. Even Jack and Jimmy were nice to be around at times. Brian was an asshole but Will could put up with him.

Will decides to move on quickly. Better not to dwell on something he doesn’t plan on changing.

“When can I see you again?” Will asks.

“Eager, are you?”

“I haven’t been hiding that.”

“I am, too. I very much want to be close to you. Unfortunately, my schedule is quite busy this week.”

Will’s shoulders slump at that. Maybe he should get a job. It’s been increasingly difficult to entertain himself day by day when he’s just thinking about when Hannibal will come over next.

“But I would love for you to come over to mine for dinner on Friday night,” Hannibal continues.

“Alright, I’ll be there,” Will says, looking at his calendar. He still has a few days to kill before then.

“I have to go. I will talk to you soon, Will.”

Will hangs up and eats as much of his eggs and toast as he can before leaving the rest for his dogs.

Will spends most of the week busying himself with housework and running to the hardware store to make small, unnecessary repairs. He possibly spends some extra time wondering if Hannibal would appreciate some flower pots on the porch or a quieter fan over the stove or fewer scratch marks on the furniture.

Hannibal calls him once in a while, usually with little insignificant anecdotes about his days. Will finds it endearing that Hannibal feels the need to update him on such things, like when he finds something interesting at the rare books store or when an old acquaintance suggests a new recipe that he wants to make. One time he catches Jack asleep in his office and mumbling strange things under his breath between snores, but refuses when Will asks him repeatedly to go film it.

Hannibal will speak innocuously enough until he suddenly whispers something like, “I want to taste you,” or, “I miss how you feel against me.” Will halts and his mind delves back into half-formed fantasies with the potential that Hannibal might actually invite him over, and an hour drive really does feel like nothing at all for something like that, but then Hannibal smoothly excuses himself and Will finds himself standing in the middle of his living room frustrated and more than a little lonely.

Friday finally does come, though. Will irons his shirt and puts on cologne and everything.

Hannibal lets him in and kisses him against the door, backing him up with a fist in his shirt that creases his newly pressed clothing.

“Mm. You’re in a good mood,” Will says, pulling back. Hannibal’s eyes sparkle and Will senses that something is up. He raises one eyebrow.

“I have a surprise for you. Come.”

The box is sitting on the dining room table, tastefully wrapped in cream paper with an envelope on top. Will’s full name is scribbled across in smooth calligraphy. Will stares at Hannibal out of the corner of his eyes before Hannibal gestures for him to open it.

“Is now a bad time to tell you I’m not a big fan of surprises?” Will asks. *Or gifts,* he thinks internally.

Hannibal waits, seemingly unbothered. Will doesn’t *want* to be an asshole to him, but it is a bit unsettling just how unshakably sure in his actions Hannibal is.

Will opens the envelope, feeling Hannibal’s eyes watch his every move. He already has an idea of what he’ll find and the dread seeps in when his suspicions are confirmed.

He skims the event details for *La damnation de Faust* at the Lyric Performing Arts Center. It's not the invitation to the opera that bothers him—he can survive a boring performance and lengthy rambling from Hannibal—he's more angry about the gift box still on the table.

He looks at Hannibal one last time, trying to convey that *it's not too late to take this back.*

Will uncovers the box to find a tuxedo, just as he expected. Hannibal never told him his measurements, and Will never asked, which was stupid of him. Will runs a hand across the fabric, searching for a price tag. He knows he should be grateful, but annoyance begins to worm its way up his throat.

"Hannibal, how much was this?"

"Inconsequential," Hannibal says, leaning in to kiss Will. Will dodges it.

"I was going to buy whatever suit I needed for your shows. If it's less than 500 bucks then let me pay you back, and if it's more then you're going to return it."

Hannibal frowns. "No, Will, it's a gift."

"It is far, *far* too much. Opera tickets alone are too much but I can understand you wanting to splurge on a night out, at least. But buying my clothes? I see what you wear, I bet it's well over 500 isn't it? Jesus, Hannibal, you don't see how this is a little inappropriate?"

"No, I don't. Cost is relative, and had I threatened my own financial position to pay for it, then I agree that it would have been absurd, but this gift was not even a drop in the bucket for me, as you would say."

"It's not about you being able to buy it. I'm not poor, I can choose and buy my own clothing."

“That was not my assumption. I merely enjoy gift giving.”

Will puts his hands up. “Fine, okay, I never told you I would be uncomfortable with it. Fair. But now I’m telling you that you need to return it.”

Hannibal straightens up, looking down his nose at Will in an almost challenging manner. Will gets the feeling that Hannibal could be quite intimidating when angry, but pushes the thought away quickly. This is just a small fight, if that.

“It’s a gift. I want to see you in it,” Hannibal says.

“I don’t like repeating myself.”

“Can I ask you a question?”

“What?”

“Did your father need to borrow money from people to sustain the livelihood of the two of you?”

“Oh *classic,*” Will says, voice instantly rising. He laughs dryly. “You’re going to psychoanalyze me now? Bring up all the daddy issues that made me who I am? I’m allowed to have principles without it being something you need to therapize out of me.”

“A suit is an extra expense of disposable income, there is no question of dependency here, just your discomfort with extravagant gift-giving.”

“Maybe I should leave and let you think over what I am saying because you clearly don’t understand it.”

Will turns around and heads toward the door, breathing in and out to try and cool down the heat in his cheeks.

He halts when something tugs back on his clothes, and he turns back to see that Hannibal has a fist around the fabric of his shirt. When Will tries to tug away, he holds on, so Will twists around and tries to wrestle his arms off of it. It turns into a scuffle quickly and Will isn't sure if he's still trying to break away from his grip or if he's trying to bruise Hannibal's wrist a bit. It takes a minute before Will realizes that Hannibal isn't being aggressive with him, but rather is just trying to provoke him just enough that Will fights back.

When Will catches a hint of the smile on Hannibal's face, he turns them and shoves Hannibal into the nearest wall.

He pins Hannibal to the wall and gets in his face enough that their noses nearly touch, pressing harder on his arms and digging his fingers in bruisingly hard. He wants to see those spots arise.

It's Hannibal's fault for provoking him.

He glares at Hannibal, his anger reaching a boiling point that it probably wouldn't have without the sudden adrenaline of a physical altercation, as mild as it may have been. He stares into Hannibal's eyes for a moment more and suddenly the anger dissipates.

Will lets himself smile, wide and closed mouth, his glare not entirely wiped from his face. Hannibal returns the smile, crinkling his eyes as though Will had said something sweet rather than just hit him against the wall hard enough to bruise.

"You have no shame," Will says, realizing with certainty how much Hannibal likes being pinned.

"I would not waste my time with shame."

“You don’t even think what you did was wrong at all, do you?”

“It wasn’t. I could just as easily argue that you are too uncomfortable accepting favors.”

“It seems our respective stubbornness is like an unstoppable force hitting an immovable object.” Will presses Hannibal tighter against the wall to make his point, grunting with the effort. He feels a bulge pressed against him where Hannibal’s crotch is.

He’s gotten used to being close to Hannibal, but there are still a lot of boundaries put up. Places they don’t touch, limits to their passion. His previous self-consciousness of Hannibal’s disinterest begins to dissipate with the contradictory evidence of Hannibal’s arousal laid out in front of him.

He wonders if Hannibal is just too concerned with playing mental gymnastics with Will to spend his time on physical ones, but the desire in Hannibal’s eyes right now is unmistakably desperate. He likes being manhandled like this.

To see what he does, Will lets go and steps back until they are no longer touching. Hannibal looks almost pained, but quickly he straightens up and fixes his ruffled clothing, returning to full composure as if nothing happened.

“Why haven’t you tried to sleep with me?” Will blurts out. He had considered being more subtle to maintain his own dignity, but in his experience, sometimes being brutally forward is even more disarming for the person being asked. The surprise on Hannibal’s face is worth it, especially as Will manages to fashion his face into something unreadable. Hannibal hesitates and Will can see his uncertainty about how to reply, which is also uncharacteristic for him. Will lets himself smile smugly.

He takes pity on Hannibal and half-mockingly says, “Is it some kind of fifth date chastity rule you have?”

Hannibal composes himself quickly again, which is annoying. “No,” he says simply.

“Just not interested?” Will asks, not sure if he’s able to keep the bitterness entirely out of his voice.

Hannibal smiles amusedly and then steps close and surprises Will with a kiss. A *hard* kiss, one that sends a message that there’s a lot of interest involved. He spins him and Will’s back hits the wall with a thud, startling a yelp out of him at the impact of their reversed positions.

Hannibal pulls back and speaks against his lips. “I wanted to see what you would do.”

Will scoffs. “You don’t fool me, painting yourself as the curious observer. You step into the shoes of God and push fate in the direction you want it. You nudge people around until they happen to slip off of a cliff, that’s what you do.”

“What do you expect to find when you fall from this great height?” Hannibal asks, eyes twinkling.

“I think maybe you’re just looking for me to pull you over the edge.”

Hannibal smiles and presses closer.

“I don’t merely want to seduce you,” Hannibal says. “I want you to crave me so badly that you cannot help but take exactly what you want, if you don’t push me to do just that first. We are on the precipice of merging physically, and I intend to savor the rising tension like we’re starving dogs that can smell a steak being cooked through the door.”

“Everything comes back to food for you,” Will teases.

“Everything in the world comes down to consumption. I want to see your desire. I want to see you push through your prior repression so there is no hesitance to behold. I will not accept your hesitance.”

The room seems to grow warmer.

He's filled with so much desire these days that he feels like he might explode, but he has tried to hide his desperation to maintain his dignity. Now he knows that Hannibal has every intention of pushing Will to indignity. He wonders what else Hannibal wants to push him to.

"Those tickets… they're for tonight?" Will asks.

"Yes."

Will considers what he's willing to do. What he's *ready* to do. It's true that he's never allowed himself to indulge that much in his sexuality or other matters, far too concerned with how other people see him. He wonders if he's ready to let that go and let Hannibal push him into that hedonism. He *wants* to be ready.

"I suppose I had better get dressed then," Will says, and shoves Hannibal out of the way to grab the box with his new tuxedo.

Chapter 12

Chapter Summary

Will and Hannibal go to the opera. Will's mind is on far *far* more than the opera.

Chapter Notes

6.5k words of smth more ~saucy~. enjoy!

Bite after bite of filet mignon, Will keeps on glowering at Hannibal. He doesn't know if he's really angry or just feeling strangely competitive, but he knows he has something to prove and he wants to see Hannibal knocked down a peg. He chews roughly and holds eye contact and Hannibal can't seem to look away. That alone fills Will with an unexpected and addictive sense of power.

The suit fits perfectly. It's more snug than most of his pants around his thighs, but he assumes that's on purpose. He changed in front of the full length mirror in one of Hannibal's guest bedrooms and found a spare brush which he wet down to style his hair a little nicer. He knows he looks good. Youthful and put-together. Even if he usually makes himself purposefully a little off-putting to avoid the attention of most people, he knows that he can dress up nicely.

He can often catch the startled lust others feel toward him, but Hannibal is a bit trickier compared to most people. In some ways, Will feels entirely in-tune with him. They are usually in complete understanding no matter how vague their conversations may get, but there is an otherwise unmatched sense of control in Hannibal. Will understands what Hannibal gives him, but Hannibal holds back a lot. This date alone, so recently after they confirmed their romantic feelings, has confirmed a tendency for secrecy and manipulation in Hannibal.

Will can play at that game.

Hannibal also looks incredible tonight. He knows how to wear a tuxedo, to no one's surprise. Will feels a strange kind of pride over knowing Hannibal is all his, along with an itching possessiveness when he thinks about meeting Hannibal's social circle at the opera tonight. It seems unlikely that Hannibal has existed as a bachelor in that sphere without getting a significant amount of attention.

Will sips his red wine, never taking his eyes off of Hannibal. He never imagined that a dinner could feel so sensual, but he may as well be on Hannibal's lap right now for how intimate it feels to watch each other eat with the buzzing of anticipation under their skin. The only words that Will speaks during the meal are to compliment the food, to which Hannibal just smiles and stares at his mouth.

Hannibal orders them a taxi after dessert and it's new to Will, knowing he can drink as much as he wants and not worry a thing about money. Hannibal told him himself that it isn't a drop in the bucket, and Will finds that appealing in a way he's never really dreamed of after decades of practical budgeting. That's not something he's going to admit, though, lest he get ready to receive more uncomfortably extravagant gifts.

There are certain privacies that richness affords, though, or so it seems. He digs a hand into Hannibal's thigh on the way to the opera house and dares the premium-paid driver to say something.

They step into a yellow-lit, unnecessarily high-ceilinged banquet hall before the opera and it looks like Will's nightmare. Groups of suited-individuals stand around and converse and chuckle dryly at boring jokes. At least, Will assumes they're all boring. He might be biased.

"So, Mephistopheles and Faust," Will mumbles to fill the air. "I had wondered what you would choose."

"Yes. This rendition was first performed in 1846 and is based on Goethe's *Faust* but without the adaptation of Faust's redemption."

"A tragedy, I see. I was always rooting for Mephistopheles, anyway," Will says.

Hannibal tilts his head. “I as well. I was contemptuous of Faust for his weakness.”

“Well I’d give you a high-five for our shared opinions but I imagine this isn’t a cultural sphere that would appreciate that.”

“Give them a chance. Come.”

His hand settles low on Will’s back to lead him along. *Very* low. Will unintentionally straightens up but can’t say anything before he’s in front of a woman who looks him up and down rather shamelessly.

“Hannibal, I see you have been busy. I have not received an invitation to one of your dinner parties in *four months*—and I haven’t seen you at any, darling, I hope he doesn’t deprive you, too, or I will have to have a strong word with him—but Hannibal, I will forgive you just this once if you introduce me to this dear fellow immediately.”

Will puts up with it all, down to the pinch on his cheek from Mrs. Komeda that is hard enough to leave nail marks in his skin. He stretches his lips into a smile and answers personal questions and charms the snooty rich people that stand intimidatingly close to him as if to test how well he can hold his ground in their company.

It’s clear that Hannibal is popular and well-sought after in this crowd, and also that the favor isn’t exactly returned. Will catches individuals eyeing Hannibal from across the room, walking by and swerving last minute, and generally putting a great deal of effort into trying to get Hannibal’s attention without seeming desperate. Hannibal barely has to move through the crowd when so many people step into his line of view and spew comments they must think are witty.

Will can tell that Hannibal doesn’t find many of them truly humorous. He looks away from them more often than not, a subtle rejection that has people leaning in closer to try desperately to charm him. It’s difficult to tell how many people *want* Hannibal and how many people want to *be* Hannibal. He imagines most of them fall somewhere in the middle.

One man with a thick Italian accent kisses Hannibal nearly on the side of his mouth to greet him, and Will instantly considers smashing off the top of his champagne flute and digging the glass shards into his carotid artery. Too much, he thinks to himself. He turns away so he doesn't have to look, and Hannibal eventually gets the hint and breaks off the conversation.

Will's capacity for bullshit starts to wane when one psychiatrist brags about his clearly fabricated research results that are getting published next spring. Will can practically smell the pharmaceutical pay-out on him. He doesn't know how this man even fit through the grand double doors of the opera house, he could beat Frederick Chilton in a biggest ego competition.

"Impressive," Will deadpans. "And it hasn't affected your research, all of the scandals that company got called out for?"

The man answers without a single hiccup, completely oblivious. Will hides a couple more insults in among his complimentary tone and wonders how upset Hannibal would be if he ruined his reputation, until Hannibal does the exact same thing, seamlessly trashing Dr. Hendricks' lack of principles to which not a single other person seems to notice.

Will shoots thinly veiled insults at all of the most insufferable people he meets, testing both how many insults he can slide into his words, and how far he can push it before anyone notices. Hannibal does the same and Will catches onto the unspoken game immediately, his competitive side rising. No one recognizes their sly comments for what they are and Will finds himself growing more amused. *Dr. Montague, I am so deeply impressed by how you continue to make use of such outdated—I mean traditional methods in your research. Another marriage, Mr. Cho? How inspiring that you continue to try. How lucky your patients are to put up with you, Dr. Pendharkar.*

He never thought he'd have fun in a place like this. It still feels like him and Hannibal alone in the room, as if the rest of the people are merely puppets for them to play with. He wants to drag Hannibal into the restroom and devour him right then and there, but he has enough dignity to keep his hands to himself, to his own frustration.

The opera hasn't even *started*.

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He was almost hoping that Hannibal would spend his money on private seats somewhere but he finds himself next to the aisle seat, surrounded by shifting people straining their heads through the audience. Will is fidgeting already. He feels very in tune with everyone when he only wants to feel Hannibal.

He spends some time peeking down at the booklet for some direction of what is going on but finds there isn't much help. Just loud singing ringing through his ears.

He leans toward the aisle as if searching for a better view, and then slides his hand onto Hannibal's thigh. He digs his fingers into his flesh and silently dares Hannibal to pry his fingers off.

He recalls the time that Hannibal told him it would be difficult to make him feel uncomfortable, and Will joked that that had sounded like a challenge. He moves his hand up and over, feeling the seam between Hannibal's legs.

Hannibal was never hesitant, just scheming. He wanted Will to touch him, but found it amusing or attractive to draw things out and frustrate Will. It's infuriating to consider, but also admittedly fun. Will doesn't remember ever *itching* for someone this badly. It isn't just about getting close to Hannibal anymore, either. It's about proving something, and stepping up on an even level, even towering over Hannibal and molding him how *Will* wants, just like Hannibal clearly likes to do to him. The potential of holding that power feels incredible.

He feels Hannibal's pants tighten at the seam and he rubs his pinky up to feel the growing bulge.

From his torso up, Hannibal shows no sign of reaction. He stares thoughtfully at the stage with shining, rapt eyes. Will considers that, as much as he might be drawing physical reactions out of Hannibal, Hannibal's mind probably hasn't deviated from the opera one bit. Will isn't as offended as he thought he might be. Hannibal's reasons for bringing him to the opera were genuine, and Hannibal is not one to brush off art like this.

Will stays close, a possessive and dangerous hand high on Hannibal's thigh, but looks back at the stage. He hones in on the proximity and looks at the performance through Hannibal's

eyes. He begins to see the story as he remembers it through little more than the emotions in the singer's voices.

The emotions soon become as distinct as if he were feeling them as his own.

It's the loneliness, the boredom, the depression, to such great extents that it results in a desperation and hopelessness that would drive any selfish man like Faust to suicide. There is a spark of life in the desire for something better, a greedy drive not just for a happy life but for every piece of knowledge and pleasure that the world has to offer. It makes Will's heart beat faster.

Will stands up for intermission with a dizzying lack of awareness of his surroundings. Hannibal seems to notice and leads him step by step until he can set the champagne right in Will's fingertips.

His name is Will Graham, it's 9:20pm, and he is in the midst of high-society Baltimore in the Lyric Performing Arts Center, he thinks with amusement. He is on a date at the opera with a sexy older man who has not hidden how well endowed he is with capital, or other things. It sounds like a life that Will should not be living, but last time he checked, it was true, and he hasn't had any evidence that the things he sees are all a figment of his imagination for a while now.

He thinks he's been staring at Hannibal with a stupid smile on his face because Hannibal looks both smug and amused. He raises his champagne glass to drink in a way that bares his jaw and throat to Will. As subtle as it is, it feels exhibitionist. It feels like Will has been invited to sink his teeth in and draw blood, to drink and drink, and he finds that he still tastes that metallic sense of power between his teeth. He hopes it lingers.

He just barely avoids making a dumb comment that would embarrass him later like *Doctor Lecter? Yeah, I think I'm gayer than I ever thought before,* because Mrs. Komeda and other insufferable individuals mosey over to their little corner and interrupt their moment. Will blinks until he can pretend he's living in reality and hasn't taken residence in the hallways of Hannibal's mind.

As someone else drones on about the performance, Hannibal leans in, tickling his ear with his breath, and says, "I am glad you are enjoying tonight so much. I'd hate for it to come to a

close after the next act. Why don't we taxi to yours so you have no obligation to take your leave for your dogs?"

It might be the least tactful thing that Will has ever heard in his life, but he's not going to pass up the opportunity to have Hannibal in his house at his mercy.

He'd happily say fuck the rest of the story, but alas, he plays the game, and they take their seats and Will returns his hand to its rightful spot on Hannibal's leg. It doesn't take long to lose himself again.

Faust thrums with uncertainty during his bargain with the devil but in the end it is, of course, too enticing to give up. Soon the story follows with the seduction of an innocent. Will feels his mouth salivate with the craving of it all, and then he feels his mouth go dry as everything in the story slips over the edge of a great height. Will remembers now: Hannibal told him this version of the tale retains the tragedy of the earlier myths. Faust loses any hope of redemption and is carried off to hell by Mephistopheles, and the innocents of the story that Faust once knew are destroyed in the process.

The performance loses itself in darkness and Will watches as if in a trance, and glances at Hannibal's teary eyes, knowing they feel the same. His hand falls off of Hannibal's lap when Hannibal jumps to his feet to instigate a round of applause. Will feels a flash of secondhand embarrassment at the exposure before it is covered up with fondness for Hannibal's unwavering confidence. He has made no effort to hide how the performance affected him, and Will can feel every bit of those feelings. It is a fascinating, overwhelming thing to observe.

Confident that Hannibal understands that Will enjoyed the performance almost as much through Hannibal's eyes, Will leans in and says, "Can we go home yet?"

Hannibal just smiles at him with a twinkle in his eyes.

It takes an infuriatingly long time to grab their coats and say goodbye. Will shakes far too many sweaty hands and his lips hurt from smiling, but they escape into the cold air and Hannibal instantly secures a taxi cab for them. The door shuts them into comparable privacy and Will watches the opera house grow further in the distance as they take all of the tension they built up with them.

It simmers in the air for the lengthy car ride to Wolf Trap. Will stares outside as the urban lights turn into the silhouettes of rural woods and they close in to his home where nobody will see or hear them.

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Will moves mostly on autopilot when he's home: take Hannibal's coat and bag, set up the space heater, dim the lights.

"Let me just—dogs," he says, herding Lucky and Winston through the back where he can close the door on them. He doesn't want Lucky to jump on the bed and Winston can keep her company so she doesn't bark.

He takes a moment to breathe and consider how he feels. He hasn't spent much time reflecting on what it might be like sleeping with a man instead of a woman, but his excitement still overrides the nerves he has. His mind is clear and he's going to take advantage of that and hope it lasts.

He hasn't had sex in years now, and he has never had sex with a man. It always felt like a different world to him, one that existed in porn and on the fringes of society where he didn't quite fit. He lingers by his drawer of dog treats, tapping his fingers together restlessly. He breathes in, goes back, and finds Hannibal lingering just beyond the foot of Will's bed, holding a glass of whiskey that he helped himself to. The sexual tension he's felt all night returns and melds with Will's lingering tipsiness and he holds onto that as he meanders forward.

"Was it all that you hoped for?" Will asks.

"Was what all that I had hoped for?" Hannibal turns to him, interested. Will takes Hannibal's glass out of his hand and finishes the whiskey, leaving the glass on the windowsill.

"Dressing me up, exposing me to your choice of art…"

“Fitting you into my world,” Hannibal mutters a bit quietly as he looks back out the window. “It is only one piece, one story of what inspired me as a young man.”

Wil hesitates on an inkling he has, noticing Hannibal’s sudden wistfulness.

“Have you seen this opera before?”

“Many years ago in another country by another group of artists, meaning, as is all art through different interpretations, that this was an entirely unique experience next to you.”

Will ignores the subtle reassurance. “Who did you see it with first?”

Hannibal is silent for a lingering beat, and Will can put together the pieces in that hesitance.

“Someone you loved?” Will’s head feels suddenly loud and clouded. It doesn’t fit with what he needs to know of Hannibal: that they have both been alone, that they have both only just found companionship in each other. That this trumps any liaison or affair by significant margins.

“Perhaps it wasn’t real love, that first time, but I was taken by her nonetheless, naivety or not. In that state, I barely paid attention to the climax of the opera at all.”

Will sees red flash behind his eyes. “Who?”

“My aunt,” Hannibal says.

Will hesitates for a moment, surprised at the answer and wondering if he had misinterpreted something, but he looks at Hannibal’s expression and knows he hadn’t. Will thinks back to what he knows of Hannibal.

“After you were no longer the proverbial orphan? Uncle Robertus takes you in and then you fall for his wife?”

“Why, Will, you make it sound like a scandal.”

“Your life would never be so tacky. A series of metaphors and plausible deniability, I imagine. Did she love you back?”

“That is not the relevant question, in this case.”

“So it’s… that she couldn’t. Couldn’t what? Let go that she was your aunt and senior? No, I don’t imagine that kind of morality stopped anyone who raised you as their kin. She couldn’t —”

“Will,” Hannibal interrupts, giving him a look.

Will stares him down right back, determined not to break first.

“What do you want?” Hannibal whispers.

Will lets out a shaky sigh. His eyes feel heavy and hot and his mouth falls slack.

You, he thinks. He wants Hannibal and to hold every piece of Hannibal and take him away from anyone else. To have him not care for anyone else, and to never have cared for anyone else. For him to want Will just the same, because Hannibal feels like the only one he cares for anymore anyway. Just Hannibal.

He could do the same to Hannibal that Hannibal did to him: hold out until it’s Hannibal that snaps. Metaphorically blindfold him and wind him up like a toy, set him on a table close to

the edge to see if he walks off. It's just that it would frustrate Will, too. There's another way to gain power over Hannibal that's more up to Will speed. It fits with all of his desires right now.

Will breaks.

He yanks at Hannibal's clothes. He has no clue how to tie a bowtie, let alone take one off, but he manages to pull it free with enough aimless physical force, which is essentially his whole game plan for this.

The rest of his clothes are at least logical, but there are just so *many* of them with a truly excessive number of buttons for his fumbling fingers to address, and it doesn't help that Hannibal leans in to press their lips together. Will pushes Hannibal onto the foot of the bed where he falls easily with a bounce and moves down to Hannibal's pants, tugging them down inch by inch until they're by his knees taking his—surprisingly silky—underwear with it. Will is satisfied enough with this access, he thinks, appraising his half unbuttoned dress shirt and pants that happen to also restrain his legs a bit.

Will follows his instincts, which he can't exactly ignore now that he's indulging the urges that have been screaming at him for weeks, and lays down on top of a much more naked Hannibal. Tugged forward by wanting arms, he kisses him, more tongue and saliva than anything else until he gets frustrated with that and bites down. He plans to bite down until Hannibal flinches, but the flinch never comes and Will tastes blood anyway. He gasps into Hannibal's mouth and flinches where they press together near their hips, hard and prodding.

He hesitates, suddenly unsure of how far is *too* far to go, which Hannibal seems to quickly catch on to because he grasps Will's face and says, "Anything you want."

A similar, weighty sense of power like he felt at the opera returns to him. It's the taste of blood and the beating of his heart, and when he sees that Hannibal is watching in hopeful anticipation, Will stops thinking.

Will, breathing heavily, extracts himself to find his bottle of lube, crawling back on top of Hannibal when he can.

It's hard to steady himself on this bed; he *knew* putting off buying a new mattress was a mistake. It sinks down under his weight and springs dig into his kneecaps. Impatient, he sets the bottle of lube between his teeth, grabs Hannibal's hips, and drags him down the bed. It takes some effort to do, but once Will can stand on the floor he gets Hannibal's hips lined up at the end of his mattress. He tosses the lube from his mouth onto the sheets on the side with a flick of his head. Much better, and Hannibal is giving him a look he wants to remember.

There's so much he wants to do and so much on offer to him. He finally focuses his eyes on what is in front of him, this never before seen part of Hannibal, the long expanse of paler skin and greying hair. He starts with his hand, touching Hannibal's cock and feeling the length of him and how smooth the skin is, pulling back the head in experimentation. The more he hardens under his touch, the more Will can see how big he is, *thick*, even if they may be similar otherwise. It's both exciting and a little fearsome. He bends down more before there's any time to psyche himself out, and stretches his mouth around Hannibal, lowering down and sucking like he has something to prove. Hannibal breathes in sharply but then calms and strokes the skin down the side of his cheek.

Hannibal is pliant under him, watching what Will is doing. He imagines that submission won't last forever, so if Hannibal wants to see what Will is going to do now then Will is going to take advantage.

Will uncaps the lube and spreads some on his fingers. He lifts Hannibal's legs by pulling up the tangled pants around his legs and bends him in half so he can feel below Hannibal's balls, pressing forward and observing Hannibal's face as he slides between his skin. Hannibal bears down on his hand and Will presses a finger in, almost surprised at how he takes him in.

"Ah, yes," Hannibal breathes out, reaching down to touch himself.

Will thinks his internal body temperature has risen a few degrees. He's already panting, but it's less out of exertion and more out of *hunger.*

He presses into Hannibal hard enough to make him sink into the mattress. He wants to do that with his own hips, disorient Hannibal, make him forget anything but Will. He fucks in with his hand insistently and tries to follow Hannibal's cues as he shifts his hips to meet him at a better angle.

With his free hand, he unbuttons and unzips his own pants, finally getting a hand around himself, and realizes that he's aching to the point of pain. He hisses and squeezes himself to alleviate the ache.

Any self-consciousness dissipates as he touches himself and pleasure overtakes any other considerations. He wants to be in Hannibal more, *much* more. Caught up in the push and pull of Hannibal's body around his hands, he quickly jerks himself to hardness and grabs more lube.

Bending Hannibal's body with his own weight and leaning down over him, Will speaks through his teeth. "Is this what you wanted?"

Hannibal's grin widens and his eyes crinkle with satisfaction. "Yes, yes, nothing less, dear Will," Hannibal says. Will wants to wipe that look away.

He pulls back to roll Hannibal over onto his stomach. He appraises him bent over the bed, and then grabs a pillow to fold and shove under his hips. He wastes no time in lining himself up and pushing in.

Will ruts in and out of the warm skin, deeper each time, grinding until he can bottom out and look at the space where he disappears, pressed up against Hannibal's skin. It feels intimate, more intimate than with other lovers before that he didn't know so well.

"I didn't know what you had in you, I have been wondering for a while now," Hannibal says, his voice casual, as if they were simply sitting next to each other on the couch like usual. The only indication that he's affected are the veins popping out of his clenched hands.

"Shut up." Will shoves his head into the sheets and holds him there as he starts to move, getting a feel for how far he can pull out and how fast he can move when Hannibal is so tight around him.

Hannibal seems to be trying to gain control, bearing down as Will presses in and tightening around him as he pulls out. It feels glorious, but Will wants to take that control away more

than anything. He starts to move harder, faster, outpacing Hannibal's ability to dictate this moment.

Hannibal's breathing grows more rapid and he lets out a couple of strangled, unintentional noises that spur Will on to go faster and harder, pushing the limits of his own stamina. He thinks a dog might bark nearby, but he's too far away from the rest of reality to care.

Hannibal's legs tremble and Will watches in awe at the physiological changes that even Hannibal can't hold back. His noises get more insistent, gruff grunts and half-whines.

"Don't hold back your noises, show me how you feel," Will commands. He grabs Hannibal's hips to hold them steady and get a better angle, confident that Hannibal won't be able to lift his head anymore

Hannibal does what he says, suddenly vocal. His moans are muffled by the sheets and it might be the hottest thing Will has ever heard, a shocking contrast to the consistently restrained way he holds himself.

Will feels almost outside of his body, time slowing so he can focus on every single inch he moves. He likes feeling the exertion of his own strength onto Hannibal.

Even though he lost some strength while he was ill, performing manual labor day after day all his life means he not only has solid strength, but that he is practiced at using it to his limit to get things done. It seems almost violent to go harder than this, but it is tempting. What if Hannibal were to tear, and Will saw red blood below where he moved in and out?

He picks up speed unintentionally, and Hannibal's noises become more insistent. His hands dig into the sheets, and Will can see them shaking.

Hannibal struggles to turn his head to the side, out of the stifling sheets, so he can look at Will behind him. His noises come out clearer and he says, "*Will,*" in such a purposeful way that Will is confident he can take it harder.

Will fucks him into the sheets as hard as he can, straining his own muscles and panting with each thrust. The headboard hits the wall, over and over again, a drum beating *accelerando*. Normal human boundaries start to blur and Will wonders how far he can go, how he can make it hurt, how he can skirt that edge of death, and Hannibal absolutely *would* consider this the edge of death—

His attention wavers back to Hannibal when he tightens around Will, his insides beating like a heart, and he scrambles his hands in the sheets, slapping the sheets twice in a row like he can't quite handle it. The trembling escalates into near-vibrations around Will as Hannibal comes against the bed.

Will feels breathless with Hannibal's own pleasure, like feeling every bit of it. He gasps, his eyes wide.

It's his turn to please himself, he realizes. Hannibal has given him all of this, and Will can do whatever he wants, so he keeps fucking inside of him, this time chasing his own peak.

The pleasure builds thrust by thrust and he thinks about how sensitive Hannibal must be feeling below him. Does it hurt? Does he feel at Will's mercy? Will hopes so, as he refuses to slow, caught in the midst of the highest pleasure for what feels like an eternity before it bursts, grinding as deep as he can until he comes.

The peaking pleasure is endless until it's not, and suddenly he's *spent.* His muscles stop straining so much and he pulls out and stumbles. His leg cramps up like a jammed gear chain and he drops to his ass on the floor and pants, struggling to catch his breath.

He watches Hannibal struggle to roll over and a slice of self-consciousness returns to Will. That he might have taken things too far, or scared Hannibal with his capacity and drive for violence. Hell, he didn't ask permission to fuck him like that or even stop to check on him, and didn't even try to pull out to come, didn't so much as think of it. He's *never* done that before, he doesn't know what he was thinking—

Hannibal rolls over and stares up at the ceiling, then says, "God, finally."

Will looks up in surprise. “What?”

“Finally someone who knows how to fuck me properly.”

Will breathes out in relief and his chest warms with validation. He feels Hannibal’s pleasure again. *Will* made him feel that way.

Hannibal slowly pushes up, favoring his right hip in a way that shows his discomfort, and pulls up his pants. He settles down on the floor over top of Will’s legs and kisses him sweetly.

Will still feels dizzy but with this kiss, the room is full-on spinning. Hannibal looks a bit amused as he starts to massage into Will’s twitching, cramping leg.

Will smiles up at him, a bit unnecessarily shy and overwhelmingly fond. Hannibal looks fond of *him* too, and he doesn’t know if anyone has ever looked at him like that, especially not after sex like this, not that Will has ever fucked anyone like that before.

He tucks himself back into his pants a bit bashfully. He feels messy all over with sweat and fluids but it’s not entirely unwelcoming to sit in it, knowing where it came from.

Will pushes Hannibal’s hands away. “Okay, okay, I’m good and I want off this floor.”

They both push off the floor like tired old men which makes Will chuckle to himself.

“Will you stay over tonight?” Will asks, ready to pull out the excuses of the late hour and their earlier champagne, anything that will convince him. He does still feel a little drunk, but it might not be the alcohol anymore.

Hannibal looks almost amused when he says, “Please.”

Hannibal goes to the closet where Will had hung up his coat and a small bag he coat-checked earlier. He doesn't process that Hannibal pulls out pajamas and a sleek electric toothbrush until he starts to walk away.

"You brought overnight stuff?" Will asks.

Hannibal stops. "Yes."

"That confident, huh?"

"Well evidently, the confidence was warranted."

Will shakes his head but smiles as Hannibal walks off, and he lazily starts to clean up with some tissues and changes out his tuxedo, now a bit stained and wrinkled, and into a clean pair of boxers and white shirt. The air of the room chills his sweat-lined body but he reckons he can wait until tomorrow to shower. Hannibal is blunt enough to tell him he smells if he really wants to.

He also does find a bit of blood. He should check with Hannibal to see how hurt he is, but he has a feeling it doesn't matter.

He lets the dogs out in the yard and waits for his turn in the washroom. Hannibal comes out in shockingly casual pajama pants, plaid like one of Will's nicer flannels. He's shirtless, which Will spends an extra second admiring. He's solidly built, with soft hips spilling over his waistband and a fuzzy, protruding chest. His ribs draw gentle lines up the sides of his torso in the angled light and he clearly has strength in his arms. Will turns one last time to run his eyes over Hannibal's back as he crawls into bed, smooth with that natural curve that Will had just pinned below his weight, before entering the washroom.

He feels almost shy crawling into bed with Hannibal after, which is silly considering what they've done.

“Can I get you anything?” He asks, perched on one knee on the bed.

“No, thank you. Just you. Come here.”

Will turns out the lamp and crawls under the covers. He’s wanted Hannibal to stay over for so long now. He never feels quite so lonely as he does in his bed wishing he could feel someone’s body heat.

Will hadn’t quite managed to get Hannibal that naked in his impatience as they had sex, but he’s a furnace of warm skin now. Will wishes it wasn’t quite so dark so he could see more now. Of course, he will get that chance, especially after tonight. He sets his head over Hannibal’s arm and a hand on the center of Hannibal’s chest. He feels the hair on his chest and then presses his bare legs against Hannibal’s warm pajama pants.

“Dare I ask if I hurt you?” Will asks.

“Didn’t you want to hurt me?” Hannibal asks.

“Didn’t you want me to hurt you?” Will says in a mocking tone.

Hannibal replies seriously. “Yes, absolutely.”

Will tries to hold back his smile. “Shameless, so shameless.”

“You too, might I add.”

“I don’t know what got into me.”

“I assure you, I have no complaints.”

Will feels proud, thoroughly enjoying Hannibal telling him how good he was.

Hannibal rolls toward him halfway, squeezing him into a proper hug. He buries his head in Will's neck and breathes in deeply through his nose. He makes a pleased sound and does it again. He moves lower, nudging his nose against Will's armpit, and Will curls his body in tighter.

"Hey. I haven't washed."

"Don't wash. I like how you smell more than any soap you could use. This musk is authentically you. Our scents change based on our activities and your scent after sex is incredible."

Will lets Hannibal lift his arm and smells his armpit directly. It's a bit strange, but he can handle this if it's some sort of kink for Hannibal. Hannibal starts moving down further, bypassing his belly button with a breath in and then Will realizes where he's trying to smell and grabs him by his head, laughing.

"Han—Hannibal, enough," he laughs.

To his surprise, Hannibal pins his arms down with some real strength and presses his face against Will's underwear. Will lifts up his legs and tries to push him away with his thighs, but Hannibal tussles with him for a long minute. Will's smile fades away and Hannibal's grows as he pins Will's legs down with his arms and Will's wrists down with his hands. Will hesitates to use real strength, as it would make this seem more like a real fight and less like playing.

Hannibal pulls Will's underwear down with his teeth and Will gasps. Will fights in earnest when Hannibal gets his face up in Will's genitals, breathing in, but he feels his warm mouth in the next moment and his struggling fades away. Will stares at the ceiling, submitting himself to what Hannibal wants to do.

Hannibal's mouth is everywhere, warming his balls and nudging below still, which Will tenses at, clenching his ass as Hannibal licks near his perineum so he doesn't go further. He moves up again and licks at his cock, and he's doubting he'll be able to get hard again, until the arousal begins.

Will lets out a choked noise because he's also *sensitive.* He doesn't go for round two, usually just passes out right after orgasm, but the same urge is building up again even if the onset is slower than before. Hannibal swallows around his entire soft, twitching length and Will buries his hands in the sheets where Hannibal is still holding his wrists painfully tight. He breathes through his teeth and gasps out as he reaches full hardness and it feels more nice than overwhelming.

"Okay, ah, ah—also insatiable."

If he was surprised by how well Hannibal could handle bottoming, then he's shocked by how quickly Hannibal swallows around him like this is a meal he can't wait to get down. He's enthusiastic and the noises are a bit obscene and all Will can do is clench his fists and stare wide-eyed at the dark ceiling. His sucking is so consistent even as a couple of minutes pass by that Will can feel himself building more and more each second. He whines into his closed mouth, thinking he might go insane if this continues so consistently for much longer.

He kicks his legs against Hannibal's down the bed and shakes as he comes into his mouth, filling Hannibal for a second time. He twitches and yanks away as Hannibal refuses to give up even as he softens.

"Mercy, mercy," Will begs, feeling tears not far behind if he doesn't stop.

Hannibal does, though with a disappointed sigh. He stays in his spot and keeps Will pinned as he breathes in against the folds of his legs and genitals where he's sure it's much more musky, especially with how sweaty he is.

He relaxes though, and doesn't realize he's falling asleep until Hannibal crawls up next to him and startles him.

“Shh, rest, Will, I have you.”

Will turns away so Hannibal can spoon him. Arms squeeze around him, tight and protective. Maybe a little restrictive. He dozes off almost immediately.

Chapter 13

Chapter Summary

Hannibal and Will spend a domestic day together.

In his dreams, he can't see or hear anything. He's entirely in the dark as he tries to escape—from what, he's not entirely sure—and he can't get anywhere when he keeps tripping and running into things. He's almost certain he's finding himself deeper within a maze, or maybe he's just spinning in circles caught on a spider's web, but he gets pulled out of the dream too early to find out and it's just arms around him. Actually, he's pretty sure Hannibal is smelling him again.

Will pulls away, rolling right out of bed and just barely escapes Hannibal's grasp trying to keep him close.

"Will? Come back to bed."

Will hesitates. The cold air is a shock and he is completely drenched in sweat, the sheets are probably soaked through where Hannibal is laying already. His heartbeat is hammering away inside loud enough that he almost fears that Hannibal can hear it.

"I need to shower. Please sleep. It's okay, I'll just…" Will steps away quickly, even as Hannibal calls his name. It's still dark outside, but Will doesn't think he could sleep anymore if he tried.

He relaxes marginally when the water heats and he can stand in the steam of the shower. He stays in the shower for a long time, and after he gets out, he works on fly-tying, taking care to be extra quiet as it's still the middle of the night. He needs to do something with his hands. Besides, he doesn't need to disrupt Hannibal's sleep anymore than he has.

He jumps when Hannibal steps into the room. It's still early, but the sun has come up enough that Will doesn't need the lamp.

Will winces, an apology on his lips, but Hannibal kisses him before he can.

"Shh, it's okay. If I have your permission, may I use your kitchen?"

Will nods and Hannibal leaves him be. Twenty minutes later, there's breakfast on the table and fresh coffee given right to him to warm his palms. The coffee helps, and he smiles over the lip of the mug at Hannibal.

"Are you feeling better?" Hannibal asks.

"Much. It's like I'm almost human again. Sorry you had to see that."

Hannibal waves his hand dismissively. The action is strangely graceful. "Admittedly, I was also curious to witness your nightmares."

"Of course you were. I hope it was everything you dreamed of."

"I wish you had stayed and allowed me to comfort you."

Will wishes he had, too. He suddenly aches for it. He wishes Hannibal had gotten up with him, forced it upon him. For once, he respected Will's boundaries, and Will isn't as happy about it as he thinks he should be. It's kind of nice to know that Hannibal will fight through his barriers to do what he wants to Will.

"Not your responsibility," is all he says.

Hannibal frowns. “Don’t question my favors. You know I don’t like that.”

Will just nods and digs into his frittata.

“Nonetheless, it is a new day and there will be new nights. I have a question for you.”

“Oh dear,” Will says.

“If I were to go home right now, what would you do today?”

“I don’t like sleeping during the day if I can help it. I would get some things done.”

“Like what?”

“Well, walk my dogs, for one. I said I’d check what’s wrong with a neighbor’s engine. Switch out my winter tires. I want to buy a better mattress, I decided last night.”

“Would you allow me to come on your day just as planned?”

“I won’t stop you if that’s really what you want to do.”

“I really do,” Hannibal says, flashing a smile that Will can’t help but return.

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Hannibal does not complain or even seem all that bored as the day goes on. They are mostly silent as they take a walk through the woods with the dogs. Hannibal stays home as Will

helps his neighbor troubleshoot his engine, and he returns to find Hannibal curled up with a book, one hand busy scratching Lucky's head. It must be nice, because she doesn't even get up from her spot to greet Will at the door. Will expresses his hurt to them with a hand over his heart, and then Hannibal cooks him up a croque madame and Will thinks he would forgive him anything for that sandwich.

Hannibal sits on beds with him at the mattress store and frowns at each one until Will tells him to just spit out whatever his opinion is, and Hannibal somehow convinces him to buy a mattress that is twice Will's original budget. Will tells him he'd better make up every cent to Will on top of that mattress. He skips the shipment option and takes it home immediately, tied to the top of his tiny car with lines and lines of fraying rope.

To his quiet amusement, Hannibal offers to help him change his tires after. His confidence and grace aren't quite so impressive when he clearly doesn't know what he's doing. He holds his oil-stained hands up to avoid wiping it on his suit and only looks more lost. He's in Will's way more often than not, but Will doesn't have the heart to tell him to leave.

Will dozes off on the couch for half an hour in between helping with dinner, nearly completely spent on his lack of sleep and day of socializing and errands.

Dinner and wine leave him more drowsy, nodding off even as Hannibal continues to engage him in conversations of all sorts. He's just kind of confused now, and a little out of it. He has the familiar anxiety that he might lose time, before he remembers that that doesn't happen anymore.

"Why don't we take your dogs out?" Hannibal asks. "Let's go and look at your own dark sea." Hannibal pulls him up.

"I don't know why I'm so tired. Maybe the wine?"

"You didn't sleep except for nightmares, Will. Was that the worst nightmare in a while?"

"It was, yeah."

“Then perhaps you’re more used to getting a good sleep, now. That’s a good thing. Tell me about your dream?”

Will does, mumbling through the strange feelings and trying to remember what his brain thankfully let slip since the morning. Hannibal listens to him, even though Will doesn’t think it makes much sense, describing the darkness that tried to swallow him, wrap him up in a chrysalis, try to change him—

Hannibal turns him around by the shoulders and Will finds himself looking at the warm light from his house. It’s instantly comforting. He feels around for Hannibal’s hand.

“Thank you. For bringing me here. This does help. I can breathe here easier somehow. And also for the good day, you were a welcome distraction after last night.”

Hannibal just leans in and kisses him. Will’s stomach flips inside of him at the sweetness. He feels like he should be used to that by now, but it’s almost worse. It feels like he should have somewhere to put all this fondness inside of him.

“Just remember, you’re not my therapist or my doctor right now,” Will says when he pulls back. “Don’t feel like you need to take care of me.”

“Quiet,” Hannibal chides. He kisses Will again, effectively making that happen.

Hannibal guides Will’s head back to kiss him deeper and deeper against the tree and Will’s legs feel weaker than usual. So much tongue might have been unappealing another time but Will has the urge to devour Hannibal, and he thinks Hannibal might be craving the same thing. It’s slow and sweet and nourishing just as much as he hungers for more. He remembers last night, and that arousal returns quickly, already building in association to Hannibal’s touch.

He likes being pressed against the tree, but he’d be much happier in bed.

“House,” Will murmurs. Hannibal is already nodding against him.

Walking forward, he feels more than ever like the field surrounding his house is a dark sea, and that each step takes him deeper and deeper into its depths. He wades through that darkness under the light of the moon and his mind steadily quiets into nothing but instinct and desire. He feels more attuned to Hannibal than usual, and is elated by the knowledge that Hannibal must be allowing him to see what’s underneath his finely controlled persona.

They step into the light of the house and Will feels less like he’s going to drown, but he’s still unsteady on his feet. It is as if there really are rolling waves right below the floor.

“Can I get you a drink or anything?” Will asks.

Hannibal shakes his head, staring at Will’s throat, and then lower with a mischievous smile on his face.

“Okay. Come here then.”

He pulls Hannibal by his hand toward the bed, hitting the lights as he goes until only a lamp in the corner remains lit. He can hear the gentle crashing of waves around him and recognizes that he might be having an episode like he used to have, but for maybe the first time ever, he finds a strange kind of peace in it. He sits on the bed and looks up at Hannibal.

He puts one palm down on the bed. “Do you want to?” Will asks, playfully, because he can see that Hannibal very much does just by his expression.

“Let me enjoy this for a minute.” Hannibal walks closer until his legs push between Will’s knees. It’s almost predator-like how he moves and lifts Will’s chin up. The waves crash louder.

“Oh? You just want to look at me?”

Will pushes his hand away and pulls Hannibal’s sweater upward.

“You’re very nice to look at.” Hannibal pulls his sweater off the rest of the way, followed by his undershirt, and tosses them onto the nearby chair.

“I’m already inviting you to bed, no need to try and charm me,” Will says, staring at Hannibal’s chest. He skirts his hands over Hannibal’s hips and then tugs down at Hannibal’s pants, which Hannibal also indulges him in stripping. He feels so lucky to have this now. He’s *never* had this before, not like this, and he doesn’t know what he’ll do if it ever stops.

“I’m going to charm you—” Hannibal says, kneeling next to him and finding his neck with his mouth and the hem of his shirt with his hands “—because I want to.”

Will tilts his head, liking the wetness left behind on his neck by Hannibal’s mouth. His teeth feel sharper than Will expected. So do his nails, brushing against the skin on his stomach. It almost feels like puncture wounds are left in its wake, welling and dripping blood without the pain.

“What do you want to do with me?” Will asks, and he’s not entirely sure that he’s asking about tonight.

“Be patient, Will, and I will show you.”

Hannibal’s hand squeezes around the back of his neck, claws digging in and all. He pulls Will back to lay down, and the waterfall crashes through.

Will pushes off his own pants with little patience and moves to the middle of the bed where he kisses Hannibal again.

He wraps one knee around the back of Hannibal's legs and pulls him tighter, rutting up lazily as he focuses more on figuring out how Hannibal's lips move. He's not entirely convinced that it's not the whole house rocking them with how effortless it feels, but any kind of psychosis sinks nicely into the background of his mind.

When they grow breathless, Hannibal pulls back and thumbs repeatedly against Will's nipple. Will has to close his eyes and make an effort not to whine.

"You said I wasn't your doctor. I never actually referred you to a new psychiatrist," Hannibal says.

Will bursts into short, surprised laughter. "Oh shut up. Why would you remind me you're my psychiatrist right now? If we consider *technicalities* at least."

"It doesn't excite you? Even just a little?"

"Maybe a bit."

Hannibal kisses his jaw and Will tilts his head up automatically.

"Is this *not* therapy then, Doctor Lecter?" Will feels Hannibal grind down a bit harder.

"It can be a kind of therapy, absolutely. We'll do this during our appointment time. Maybe I'll add a few more slots throughout the week."

"What, on your desk like the movies?"

"I don't know these kinds of movies you're watching."

“Something really obscure, you probably haven’t heard of it, called ‘mainstream movies’ and their ‘tropes.’”

Hannibal pinches his nipple and Will sucks in a fast breath through his teeth.

“Sorry you can’t find that stuff at the opera,” Will continues anyway, and Hannibal smooths out the sting of pain with his palm which only manages to make him feel more sensitive.

“I thought you were talking about pornographic movies, and perhaps you searched up a therapist kink.”

“Christ, no, I don’t actually have—please, let’s stop talking now.”

“If you wish.”

“I do wish. Do I get more wishes?”

Hannibal looks at him in amusement and then yanks down his underwear from his hips. Will lifts up, glad to be rid of them. When Hannibal comes back, he wraps his mouth around Will’s cock and Will chokes on his own spit. Hannibal sinks impressively far down and Will can practically feel all of his blood moving south.

Everything feels slick now. He rocks up and down steadily and Hannibal starts to suck gentler than before, too gentle to pull him over the edge, and Will lets it go on for a while. He’s so good at this. If Will could indulge in this everyday, he would die happy.

It spreads through him bone deep and it’s much harder to keep still and quiet as the feeling grows in intensity. The waves seep through the floorboards and move through the house steadily, and he feels the anticipation of warm water about to cover him. He’s starting to get close, though, and he doesn’t want it to be over.

“Come back,” Will says, and draws Hannibal up. Hannibal lays down on him, hand still between his legs when he kisses Will.

It takes some nudging and noises of protest against Hannibal’s lips to get him onto his side where Will can touch him back, gathering up precome in his fist. He keeps trying to kiss Hannibal even though in return he mostly gets his lips bitten and slicing scratches down the back of his neck.

The pleasure is drawn slowly from his body when he comes from Hannibal’s hand. The waves crash through him, stronger and stronger with his gasping breaths. Hannibal holds on, squeezing through aftershocks until Will pushes him away.

He can focus on Hannibal now, he realizes with excitement. He pushes himself up with as much energy as he can muster and straddles him. He’s swaying on the spot—apparently his impromptu mind-boat-ride hasn’t ended—but he rides it out. He touches Hannibal with his hand, paying close attention to Hannibal to see what he likes, trying hard to be in tune with him and feel what he’s feeling. He kisses and nips at his neck and chest, and Hannibal lets out more nice noises, though they aren’t as desperate as when he was getting fucked.

Finally, Will puts his mouth on Hannibal. He keeps his hand around the base and tries to press down into his throat as much as possible. It’s difficult—Hannibal is large and Will is slobbering everywhere and in his fervor, he chokes rather loudly and then looks up at Hannibal, half-amused and half-bashful.

Hannibal returns his expression, and then grabs Will’s hair tight enough to make his scalp tingle. It’s done in a playful way, but it still hurts. Pain seems to be like a constant for Hannibal, just little ways that push Will’s limit. Scratching claws, sharp teeth, black eyes…

Will focuses back onto the task at hand, pushing away the thoughts. He might be too exhausted, like Hannibal said. Or maybe he’s relapsing, which he can ask about later. Hannibal pushes his head down, and Will struggles to breathe as he works on not choking.

Hannibal guides him by his head, holding him as deep as he can for an uncomfortably long time until tears slip from Will’s eyes. He lets Will up only to press down again once Will has gasped in a breath of air. Will chokes, unsure of how long he can do this for until Hannibal

pulls him off suddenly, hand still in his hair so that Will can't move as he comes on his face, splashing around his mouth and chin, marking him in spurts.

"Jesus," he mutters. Degrading is the only way he can think to describe the feeling of it, but he doesn't *not* like it.

When he's finally let free, he reaches for a tissue, but Hannibal pulls him up by his head and kisses him on all the mess, smearing his release across both of their faces. Will manages to push him away eventually, laughing through it.

"The way you appear is such a lie. You're not a gentleman at all," Will says, wiping near his eye.

"I'll clean you up like a gentleman," Hannibal says, rolling out of bed.

Will lays back with his arms over his head until Hannibal returns with a warm washcloth, gently cleaning from his face to his hips. The contrast is stark, from pain to pure sweetness and care.

"Stay again," Will says.

"Of course."

Will smiles and stands up on slightly unsteady feet to brush his teeth. Hannibal even lets his dogs out for him and brings him a glass of water.

He kisses Hannibal when he gets back in bed, slowly with swollen lips. He tries to press gratitude into the kiss, because he knows Hannibal would look at him funny if he thanked him aloud. It's not like Hannibal's *given* him anything. He just doesn't know how to tell him that this is the longest he's gone with his mind so blissfully calm in years, even with the nightmare last night.

He hooks his chin over Hannibal's shoulder to peer at the clock and sees that it's past midnight. He wouldn't have been that surprised if it was hours later. It feels cliche to think that time stopped while they were together, but it was only because Will's mind latched so strongly onto the distracting pleasures that it drifted into nothingness.

Hannibal drags him in by his arms and overlaps their pillows so Will's head can rest above his shoulder. Hannibal promptly starts petting through his hair and all the way down his spine to the backs of his thighs before slowly moving up again and Will's eyes flutter.

"Perhaps I can help you with these nightmares that plague you," Hannibal says, leaning his cheek against Will's forehead.

Will thinks he's moments away from being knocked out for good anyway, but he says, "Yeah?"

"Close your eyes. I want you to tense and stretch your feet."

Will glances up at him once even though Hannibal can't see, and then closes his eyes and does what Hannibal told him. Their limbs bump under the sheets.

"And then relax them, imagine your feet sinking into the sheets. Next, tense your calves, followed by your thighs, hold until I say… and then relax your limbs, imagine them heavy enough to melt away."

Will follows his instructions, from his hands to his biceps, up his torso, tensing and twisting until he cracks his back and his neck, and then he sinks down, weightless. Hannibal continues petting him and that alone makes his eyes droop heavily.

"Are you relaxed, Will?"

He manages to nod slightly.

“Good. Now imagine yourself in the place you feel most safe. What it looks like, what it smells like, every tactile sensation, what noises do you hear…”

The fishing rod sits comfortably in Will’s palms, already tugging slightly from something in the water. That give and take is satisfying. The water is deliciously cool around his legs while the sun warms the rest of his body. He breathes in the fresh air and something else, warm cologne and familiarity. There are nice hands running down his back. This company in his stream is welcome today.

“Nightmares may come into you,” a voice whispers. “If they do, Will, all you need to do is relax. Relax with yourself, relax with the monsters in your head. That is how you will be happy, Will. Relax….”

Chapter 14

Chapter Summary

Will wakes up next to Hannibal after a deep sleep and gets a call from Jack.

Something tugging on his hair slowly pulls him into wakefulness, though he fights it and tries to stay under. After a bit more insistence, he blinks his eyes and finds his face pressed against Hannibal's neck.

"I'm hungry," Hannibal whispers into his hair.

Will is aching to close his eyes again, so he does. Everything is too warm but it's not particularly uncomfortable. The sheets stayed wrapped around him all night, but most of the heat comes from where he's touching Hannibal.

He hears a thump nearby and the sound of claws on hardwood.

"If it's more convincing, I imagine your dogs are hungry too. Lucky is going so far as to try and get on the bed to wake you up. She hasn't been able to make it yet, but not for lack of trying."

"It's early," Will mumbles.

"It's not that early." Hannibal turns in his grip and Will hangs on. "Half past eight."

Will jerks up. "What?"

Will lifts up on his elbow and finally looks around, checking the clock himself. “I never sleep this late.”

He is curled up in Hannibal’s space, his side of the bed left cold. The dogs are up and about, swarming each other like fish, restless at the late routine.

He squints out the windows at the too-bright sun. “I don’t even remember my dreams.”

“You look like a man that has had an incredible revelation.” Hannibal runs his hands up and down his sides and Will tries not to twitch.

Will finally looks down at Hannibal and finds him with soft hair over his forehead and slightly swollen eyes, just like how Will’s feel. Will gives into every urge inside of him and lays back down on Hannibal, hugging him around his chest. He can’t even remember the last time he wanted to sleep in and enjoy the comfort of his bed. Aside from the worst period of his recovery, he usually wakes up uncomfortably wet and rattled and desperate for something else to fill his mind.

“You needed the sleep, so I wanted to let you stay under that blanket of peace for as long as possible. Nevertheless, your dogs disagree, and I am also growing impatient to shower. I would let you take off my arm and keep it if I could.”

Even though it’s the last thing he wants to do, Will rolls away with a sigh.

“Will you allow me to scour your kitchen, then?” Hannibal asks.

“Knock yourself out.”

“You can take the time to rest more,” Hannibal says, crawling out of bed.

Will gets up instead, rubbing the sleep out of his eyes. His bed loses all appeal without Hannibal in it. He tries not to pout as he prepares the dog food.

Hannibal showers and Will wonders if he brought luxury imported shampoo from Europe or something, thinking it very likely.

After his turn in the shower, which does smell of something much more expensive than his products, he emerges to find his kitchen counter busy with more ingredients than he realized he had. He walks closer to peer right over Hannibal's shoulder. He's half hoping he'll annoy Hannibal by getting in his personal space like he did to him on their first date, but Hannibal turns and gathers him up to kiss him sweetly instead.

Will's gut twists up inside of him more intensely than he thought it could, the warmth traveling up his chest and into his throat. Hannibal smells lovely and their mouths are both minty. Will holds Hannibal's hands where they stroke his beard so he doesn't pull away.

Hannibal kisses the corner of his mouth and pulls back. "Do eggs benedict sound good?"

"Uh-huh."

"Good, because I'm already making it. You can grab our coffee, and if you'd like, it would be nice to have some of that fruit in your fridge."

Will pries himself away from Hannibal to grab everything and set the table. He waters his venus fly trap and can't help himself from sticking a finger into a trap to feel it bite. He turns it slightly in the sun, admiring it.

Lucky follows Hannibal around the kitchen so closely that it's like she's trying to get stepped on, and it's endearing to see Hannibal skip around her, back and forth as he keeps track of everything cooking. He tosses down a tiny piece of bacon and Will knows the puppy must be impossibly more infatuated now.

The sun streams across the table where they sit to eat when breakfast is ready and Will feels a bit unnervingly like he's playing the part of someone else. The last thing he wants to do is shatter the facade; his entire house feels brighter and fuller with Hannibal here.

"This is delicious, by the way," he says.

"I enjoyed you cooking for me, and you can do it when you like, but as you know, I really enjoy cooking for you. Some things in a relationship can be unequal."

"I'll do the dishes, then," Will says, though his mind zeroes in on the word 'relationship.' He smiles into his juice.

"While I have enjoyed my time here, I will need to return to Baltimore this morning."

Somehow, Will didn't see that coming. His stomach sinks, but he plasters on a smile and nods in understanding.

"I assure you, I will see you very soon," Hannibal says.

They finish breakfast and tidy up and a half an hour later, Hannibal steps out the door.

Almost immediately after he pulls out of Will's property, Will's phone rings.

He has a bad feeling about it, which is confirmed when he pulls it out to find Jack's name on the screen. Will sighs and squeezes his eyes shut. Not *now.* Not when everything has been so nice.

"This better be good," he says in lieu of a greeting. He hasn't had enough coffee to be nice yet.

“You told me I could call you if it was the Chesapeake Ripper,” Jack says.

Will sighs deeply and dips his face into his hand. “Oh, give me a break. Not you, Jack. Him.”

“Can I still depend on you?”

Will hesitates, but then nods to no one. This is the Ripper. “Yeah, you can.”

“I’d appreciate your quick presence. This is one they really want to get cleaned up fast. I’ll text you the address. And Will, I’m sorry to have to call you like this again.”

“Yeah. I know.”

Will hangs up and grabs a to-go coffee cup with more aggression than necessary. He gives Lucky some last minute attention and checks his phone, stuttering in his step when he sees the location, and then walks a bit faster toward his car.

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“Yeah, so, Ripper might be a Scuba diver now. And once again it seems like we’re looking for someone with far too much time on their hands. Or too much time on their fins,” Zeller says.

“He might have swam up and down. People can train to hold their breaths for longer. The current world record for a person holding their breath consecutively is 24 minutes and 37.36 seconds,” Price says, almost excitedly.

“Yeah, staying still. Not doing this,” Zeller quips back.

“Well okay, take off a few minutes, you know what I’m trying to say.”

“Well you could be *clearer* is all I’m saying…”

“Has to be a strong swimmer,” Beverly confirms, breaking off their banter and stepping up next to Will. “Hey, long time no see, Will. Man, look at the size of that tank.”

“I’m looking,” Will mutters breathily. The body of an unidentified male is staged in a 15 foot tank at the National Aquarium in Baltimore. Dozens of live fish continue to circle the body, flashing colorful reflections upon the still intact skin. The body appears to be forever swimming downward, reaching for the bottom with a fingertip just inches away from the sand.

The most striking part of the tableau is the chest, which is hollowed out to house some brightly coloured corral and vibrant, open clams, bunched together like a bouquet. Two more shells cover each of his eyes and a dead fish gags his mouth. Will can’t stop gawking at the scene.

The Ripper has not been known to escalate. He seemed to come into the game swinging at full power. But this scene, Will is ashamed to admit, sends goosebumps over his skin.

“A worker here is going to come in and identify the aquatic life used, if there was anything added or taken away in this particular tank. But, uh, after the body is taken away,” Price says.

“Fair enough,” Will says.

“Still, I love fish, I even wanted to be a marine biologist as a kid, if only I wasn’t so scared of deep water and sharks and anything touching my foot while I swam…” Price says. “But I *can* tell you that the clams coming out of the chest cavity are giant clams, a kind of Tridacna that we’ll confirm the species of. They are very popular for their bright colors, and some are eaten. They are quite delicious.”

“The corpse was probably drained of blood before its torso was hollowed out, seeing as there’s little discoloration in the water,” Beverly says.

“Though the fish would probably eat the excess, same with any skin cells from the Ripper. We took some samples of the water, but it doesn’t seem like we’ll find any evidence again,” Zeller says.

“No, there won’t be evidence.” Will rubs his forehead. He hears the sound of heels on the floor and turns to find Alana walking closer.

“Oh, hello. What are you doing here?” Will asks.

“I thought some more help could do us some good, especially with you around less,” Jack says.

“I know I was second choice after Hannibal couldn’t make it,” she says, smiling at Will in greeting.

“I still appreciate your insight, Dr. Bloom,” Jack says, dropping his head slightly.

“I know, you’d better,” she says lightly, and then turns to look at the murder tableau. Her smile slowly drops. It isn’t a good feeling to see her look so disturbed in the face of cruelty, but Will knows better than to try and protect her from this stuff. It’s not like *he* ever responded to protection. She just seems too good and untarnished to be tainted by all the murder, even though he knows very well that this stuff has always interested her. At least all that goodness probably means it will be harder for it to touch her.

Will narrows his focus onto something else. “What’s Hannibal doing that got him too busy?” he asks.

“Didn’t say,” Jack says.

“Maybe he has patients?” Will asks, but it’s sunday, that makes no sense. He wonders if it would be invasive to ask for Hannibal’s schedule. He just wants to know when he can typically see him.

“I don’t know, Will. Why?”

Will shakes his head.

Jack gestures back at the scene. “It’s the Ripper, isn’t it?” Jack asks.

“Yeah, I think so,” Will says.

“Let’s give Will the space and go chat. Dr. Bloom, please.”

Will stands a bit aimlessly as everyone passes by him. He uses the alone time to dig some aspirin out of his pocket and swallow it down dry. He hasn’t had a headache for a long time but he can feel one creeping up on him. Maybe he *is* relapsing. He’ll ask Hannibal how likely that is later.

He looks up at the scene in front of him and promptly shudders and rubs his hands over his face.

Excuses run through his mind. *I’m still too sick, Jack.* Or *It’s getting too hard to look, maybe it’s this job that makes me sick afterall.* Or *please don’t make me look at the Ripper. If I look too hard I may never look away. I’m trying to escape this.*

He doesn’t know how long he stands there, foggy and lost in his own mind that is refusing to latch on, before the sound of footsteps nears again.

He turns, “Jack, I might not have much to offer today. I’m not feeling too good still.”

Alana is the first one to walk up to him, though, and she puts a hand up on his forehead. He makes an effort not to move away.

“Are you feeling sick again?”

“I don’t think it’s that. I’m fine. But I don’t know how much help I’ll be today.”

Jack frowns behind her shoulder.

“It’s okay, Will,” she says gently. “I just got a call from the hospital, though, I was coming to ask, have you heard from Abigail? Can you check your phone?”

He digs it out quickly. “Why?”

“She’s run away again. And Hannibal didn’t say anything when I talked to him earlier. I’ll call again and see if she’s turned up. Cameras show her leaving the hospital shortly after midnight, though.”

“Is this turning into a habit? How much has she been running away?” Jack asks when Alana drifts away with her cellphone.

“Not much, Jack. But remember, she’s stressed and traumatized,” Will says.

“And gone all night, apparently,” he says.

“What are you implying, Jack? She couldn’t have done this. It was the Ripper.”

“You said you weren’t feeling well, how confident are you really?” Jack asks.

“Look at it! I’m pretty damn confident. Do you think she would have the strength to set this up? The skills to disable the cameras?”

“How much time have you been spending with Abigail, Will?”

“Not much.”

“You feel protective of her, though.”

Before Will can reply, he hears Alana’s voice rise and turns.

“—that’s not an excuse! You knew we’d get that call and start to worry.” She pauses. “We can all help to support her, but we need to *know* where she is, Hannibal.”

Will checks his phone again, hoping that maybe he missed a call from Hannibal, but there’s nothing. He frowns.

Alana hangs up and walks back.

“She’s at Dr. Lecter’s?” Jack asks.

“She is,” she says, looking at Will instead. Her eyebrows furrow in concern and Will knows that something must have gone awry.

“I’m going to go get her,” Alana says, and Will wonders what makes it so that Hannibal can’t drive her back to the hospital himself.

“I’m coming with you,” Will says. “Jack, get me the details of this case for later?”

Jack grabs his arm before he can go. “Tell Dr. Lecter to call me when he can. I want to know when Abigail arrived and what kind of state she was in.”

Will shakes him off and catches up to Alana. He checks his phone again. Hannibal could at least update him *now.*

“What did he say exactly?” Will asks when they’re out of earshot.

“She’s incapacitated.”

“Meaning?”

“She broke into his medicine cabinet. And his liquor cabinet. He said he got home and found her very not sober. I don’t know where he was, anyway?”

Will stays quiet.

“He always thinks he can handle and control her, yet she panics every time!” Alana complains. “How does she keep getting out of the hospital without being seen? She’s very careful and manipulative, it’s not good that she’s rebelling like this. And drugs and alcohol are just about the worst coping mechanism she can get into right now.” They walk into the parking lot and Will squints at the sun. “I’ll drive?” Alana asks.

Will concedes with a nod.

“Why didn’t he tell us?” Will asks, mostly meaning *him*. He can guess why he didn’t tell Alana. She worries much more.

“He said he wanted her to ride it out first before anyone else bothers her.”

Will takes out his phone again and considers texting him but he doesn’t know what to say and Alana will probably ask about it.

“You okay?” she asks, starting the engine and pulling out quickly.

“What? Yeah. Well, I’m worried.”

“Me too. It’s a hard time for her, but she’s lucky to have all of us. She’ll get better.”

“Do you think she’ll be able to leave soon? Maybe the hospital isn’t good for her.”

“I think it’s the safest place for her right now. Where else would she go?”

“Maybe not *right* now, but me and Hannibal could look after her.”

“What, going back and forth between your guys’ places?”

“We could figure something out,” he says simply.

She’s quiet for a few moments. “Figure out what?”

He shrugs. “I don’t know. Just whatever is best for her.”

“Did you guys talk about plans?”

“No, no.”

“Your face is turning red.”

“Maybe my fever *is* back.”

“Your face wasn’t warm a few minutes ago.”

He stays quiet and feels her studying him.

“You can tell me anything, you know that, right?” she says. “No matter our past, I can worry about my own boundaries. I won’t tell Hannibal, and I can keep a secret. In fact, I’m quite pissed at him right now, so you really don’t have to worry about that.”

He looks out the window and presses his thumb against the ridges on the door absentmindedly. It almost sounds like she has already guessed what is going on. He and Hannibal never discussed what they would tell their colleagues about their relationship, but he doesn’t expect Hannibal to be very shy. If he and Hannibal can convince Alana that they are stable, maybe they can make a better life for Abigail outside of the hospital.

“We’ve been on a few dates, that’s all. I’m not trying to get ahead of myself here or make a big deal of it. But I know we both just want to support her...” He slowly trails off when he sees her head spin on him.

“Wait, you *what?*”

Will freezes. “I thought maybe you’d known.”

“I had a hunch that you had feelings for Hannibal, and I was wondering how you were dealing with it. I didn’t think anything actually happened!”

“Well, your hunch was right, and I asked him out. Don’t have to sound so shocked about it.”

“I understand you wanting to ask him out, it’s his decision I have a problem with.”

He looks over at her, and she quickly says, “Not like that, obviously.”

“We can figure it out,” Will says a bit more firmly, sorely regretting telling her anything.

“It crosses so many professional and ethical boundaries, and there’s a good reason for it! You’re relying on him for psychological support and it shouldn’t be mixed with anything as unstable as a romance. There’s a power imbalance in a patient-psychiatrist relationship that there shouldn’t be in a romantic one.”

“I said we’ll figure it out! Besides, it was mostly just conversations before. Our dynamic has changed.”

“Did you rely on him for support?”

“He can still support me just fine.”

“There’s—”

“Alana! I really don’t want to talk about it. He’s referring me anyway, okay?”

She drives quietly, though the vehicle is filled with tense silence.

“I’m sorry,” she says eventually. “Maybe some of my anger is coming from jealousy.”

“It’s okay,” he says weakly.

“And I’m becoming increasingly pissed at him,” she says.

He laughs a bit, the tension clearing slightly. “It’s okay. I’m a bit pissed, too. About Abigail, not… maybe it’s not that conventional or ethical but I’m happy and I can take care of myself.”

“I understand that,” she says, still sounding bothered. “I meant this to be a supportive conversation and I freaked out. I shouldn’t yell at you. I *am* going to yell at him but anyway... Let me try to start over? How are things going?”

He holds back a sigh. He probably won’t be able to escape this conversation now. “Good. Really good, actually.”

“Yeah?”

He smiles shyly. “He was at my place last night. That’s why he wasn’t home.”

“I didn’t know you were attracted to men.”

He snorts. “Yeah, I wasn’t overly aware before, either.”

“How are you feeling about that?” She asks, her supportive therapist voice coming through in full.

“Fine.”

“It’s okay if you’re ever not. The shame can creep up on you, and just remember there is no basis for it. If you ever want someone to talk to… I’m attracted to women and sometimes those age-old assumptions, that it’s dirty and wrong, they creep in, but it doesn’t have to hurt your relationship. So you can talk to me, if you want. I’ll handle my own boundaries.”

He nods slowly in understanding. “Thank you, Alana, that’s nice of you to offer. And thank you for telling me.”

“No pressure, though, don’t let me send you into a panic.” She puts a hand on his shoulder.

“Yeah, hah, I’ll try not to,” he says, wincing. “You gonna ask Hannibal this stuff?”

“...No. But I already knew he was interested in men and comfortable with himself. He didn’t hide his affairs very well.”

Will clenches his jaw and feels a rush of unbridled heat rush into his head.

“Ah,” he says flatly, looking away.

“I’m sorry, I don’t mean… only that I know you’ve mostly kept to yourself the last few years.”

“I’m gonna need us to change the conversation topic now,” he says, not trying very hard to sound nice. He can see how defeated she is by the way her head hangs forward. Logically, he knows she’s trying to be a good friend. Trying a lot harder than he is, but he can’t find it in himself to care right now. He leans his head back against the headrest and closes his eyes until they reach Hannibal’s.

They walk out in silence that gets filled with some kind of noise reverberating from the house the closer they walk. They share a look of confusion, and then Alana tries the door knob and finds it unlocked.

Pop music blares from the living room. They follow the noise into the living room

Hannibal spins Abigail around in a stumbling waltz that makes her laugh loudly, louder than Will has ever heard before. Despite his bad mood only minutes ago, Will can't stop the smile that spreads on his face. He watches them together, bright in their happiness, and he sees something akin to family.

Chapter 15

Chapter Summary

> Abigail stays at Hannibal's for the day and Will tries to understand the tumultuous emotions she's going through.

Chapter Notes

> it's thursday somewhere 🤪
> i'm behind on replying to comments but i wanted to say that i really appreciate all the feedback ❤️ it's a cram to get chapters out right now as im on vacation with family so these chapters might be slightly less well-edited, but i'll prioritize posting on time and then i'll be back home on monday!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Hannibal turns down the music while Abigail stares at them like a deer in the headlights. She's wearing baggy pajamas rolled up around her limbs, probably Hannibal's clothes. Her cheeks are bright red and her eyes don't quite focus when she looks between Will and Alana.

Alana walks closer and rubs her shoulders affectionately, subtly trying to look in her eyes to see how intoxicated she might be. It's Abigail that leans close enough to make Alana hold her properly.

"Are you okay, Abigail?" Alana asks gently.

"I'm *fine*," she says, the shame making her voice sound small.

Will lingers near the door, a bit aimless until Hannibal comes to stand next to him.

“Why didn’t you call me?” Will asks him, keeping his voice down, but Abigail’s head shoots up anyway.

“I asked him not to tell anyone,” she says. Alana puts a gentle hand on her shoulder but Abigail keeps talking. “I broke in. I just wanted *one* night away from it all.”

“And we can understand that,” Will says. “But this is not the way.”

Alana nods. “We need to know where you are. We didn’t know if you were lost or in danger.”

“Where else would I go?” Abigail asks. Will feels a flash of sudden emotion but he swallows it down.

“We all want to see you out of the hospital and into a real home. We just need to make sure you get better first, and we need you to follow the rules for now. It won’t always be this way,” Will says.

She peers at Alana with sad eyes. “Are you mad at me?”

“No, no,” she says quickly, then looks over her shoulder at Hannibal. “I’m mad at *you,* though. I’m going to give you a piece of my mind later.”

Will flashes him a bashful smile, almost wishing he could warn him about the lecture to come, but he’s still a bit upset about being left in the dark, too.

“I understand, and I believe I would have felt similarly,” he says politely.

“Then you should have thought about that before!” she says before shaking her head. “We’re going to talk *later,* though. In private.”

Abigail giggles, swaying where she stands. “Oh, you’re done for.”

“I really am,” Hannibal says.

“It really isn’t a laughing matter,” Alana says, but contradicts herself with a smile. “Fine, you can laugh, right now I’m just happy to come and find you in one piece.”

Abigail beams at Alana and Will watches them curiously. He feels something, but he isn’t certain what it is, admiration or something more in Abigail’s eyes. She keeps laughing, giddy and free, and leaning into Alana’s warmth, but the drugs and liquor she stole might be affecting how she’s thinking and acting.

“I’m very glad you’re okay,” Alana says, looking away from her gaze.

“And… having fun?” Will asks.

“He’s teaching me how to dance!” she says, posing in a way that’s more self deprecating than graceful. A moment later she goes to collapse on the couch. “No, I won’t show anyone or speak of this ever again.”

“She won’t let me choose the right music,” Hannibal says with a sigh.

“I don’t like your music, sorry I wasn’t born in 1632.”

Will snorts loudly and Hannibal stares at him, disappointed.

“You deserved that. It’s all a bit outdated,” Alana says, going to sit on the armrest near Abigail’s head. Abigail reaches for her hand and stares up at her with those big blue eyes again. She burrows deeper into the cushion, legs curled up. It could be a crush, Will thinks. Or a clutch for balance. He can relate, thinking about how steady and warm Alana is.

Hannibal just gives them a look. Will thinks he might be more amused than annoyed.

“Now that you are both here, can I get you guys anything to drink? Coffee?” Hannibal asks.

Will follows him to the kitchen and when he sees that Alana hasn’t followed, he leans in for a hug.

“What *happened*?” he asks against his shoulder.

“She broke in through the basement window. Shortly after she found some pills from my time as a doctor, and I found her pockets filled with more. Mostly Oxycontin. I believe that is something the youth are aware of as a party drug. Nonetheless, I don’t think her goal was ever suicide. I believe she was looking for a more temporary escape and saw the opportunity in my medicine cabinet.”

Will nods in understanding. “And then mixed it with alcohol?”

“She found some very expensive red wine, yes.”

“Of course she did. Are you feeling the pain of raising a teenager? One with heaps more trauma piled on than most?”

“The good and the bad.” Hannibal looks away and starts fiddling with the coffee maker before he pauses again and straightens up. “It was like I saw her happy for the first time. Loose and free without a care in the world, even though it was achieved through artificial means,” he says.

Will frowns and rubs his arm comfortingly.

“We will have to be careful to not allow her to go down the path of addiction, but if I’m being honest, I’m happy she had last night,” Hannibal says. “It may sound unconventional but I believe a bit of madness is good for the soul. Intoxication can help us to see the world in different ways, and maybe she deserves an escape. I believe the rebellion is far from over, and she may want to raise hell for a while longer, and we should let her, within reason. I believe unconventional may be just what she needs.”

“I get that. Not… this way exactly. But I want her out of the hospital too. And I don’t want to jump every gun, but maybe one day she can be with us instead.”

“Of course. I imagine that, too. I believe we can help her come into herself and find family again.”

Will leans his forehead against Hannibal’s shoulder and nods.

“I’m worried about what Jack thinks about her too,” Will says.

“He is still suspicious?”

“Yeah, he thinks she—well I just came from a crime scene, it was the Ripper and it was… a lot. When we mentioned her sneaking out, he suspected her. When did she get here, do you think?”

“I know it wasn’t Abigail,” Hannibal says.

“Right, yes, me too. There’s no way. We’ll tell Jack.”

He wants to ask about Nicholas Boyle again, whether they should be talking to her about it, but he hears footsteps coming nearer. He turns to find Alana walking in with purpose.

“She passed out. Will, do you want to sit with her in case she wakes up? I need to talk to Hannibal about *boundaries*.”

Will winces. “She knows about us. Sorry,” he pats Hannibal’s arm and then walks away from his surprised face.

He finds Abigail still on the couch with a blanket thrown over her. He pulls it up a bit closer over her shoulders and sits to watch over her.

Alana goes back to work after Hannibal calls the hospital and promises to take Abigail back by the end of the day. Will is surprised they agreed until he remembers how persuasive Hannibal can be.

He calls Jack next. Will watches anxiously as Hannibal dances around the question of why he wasn’t around when Abigail showed up.

“Just tell him,” Will says.

And Hannibal does, after a long, appraising look at Will.

“Jack, I was hoping to maintain a level of privacy for my personal life, but if you must know, I was staying at Will Graham’s little farm house. Infer what you would like from that.”

He can hear the silence through the phone and Will kind of wants to go hide forever. It works, though, and Jack seems to end the call resigned to this fact.

After, Hannibal sits next to him back in the living room and rubs his shoulders. Will leans into it and closes his eyes for a while before curiosity takes over.

“So, what did Alana say to you?” he asks in a whisper so as not to disturb Abigail, still sleeping across the room from them.

Hannibal talks close to his ear, his breath rustling his hair. “First, that Abigail is her patient and it’s unacceptable and immature to hide her away like this especially when her health is threatened, no matter how much I think I can handle the situation.”

“She’s right. I would have appreciated a call, too,” Will says.

“My apologies.”

Will nods in acknowledgement and leans his head forward a bit as Hannibal starts massaging his scalp at the base of his skull.

“After all that,” Hannibal continues, “she expressed her disapproval of our change in relationship.”

“Uh-huh, I heard some of that. So, do *you* think this is unhealthy for me?”

“You tell me. As your psychiatrist, it was still not my job to make your decisions. You pursued me and I trusted you would make that decision at your own discretion. I also trust your own judgment to decide if this relationship is good for you every step of the way forward.”

“Thank you,” Will says, relieved and slightly petty remembering the conversation from the car. “And for the record, I really don’t care about whatever the rules are.”

“She is very protective of you,” he says.

“Yeah. She wants to save me. From life? My job? You and Jack? I don’t know.”

“She wants what’s best for you. Although, so do I.”

“As a matter of fact, I’m not particularly of the opinion that I deserve the worst, either.”

Hannibal huffs against his hair, amused, and then brushes his curls out of his face.

“Could you get in trouble? Is your license at risk?” Will asks.

“I never officially signed you on in order to keep on unofficially discussing your state of mind with Jack, so no. Either way, I believe I have convinced her that we can develop a healthy relationship and toe our boundaries with care.”

“I know we can,” Will says.

“Would you like to tell me about your day now? Is Uncle Jack already putting you to work again?”

“Yeah, look at that. Vacation’s over.”

Hannibal takes his palm in hand and massages his fingers. Will eyelids droop. He could get used to the constant physical affection that Hannibal offers him. It’s only with this pleasure that he realizes how sore and empty he felt before.

“How was it?” Hannibal asks.

Will isn’t sure how to respond. He feels complicated about it, about how impressive the scene was, and how distant and confused he was.

“I don’t think I’m on my A-game, let’s say that,” he says.

“What was it that blocked your mind? What piece went dark?”

Will shakes his head. “All of it, I don’t know, but I—I don’t want to talk about it. She might wake up. Besides, maybe some other people gotta pick up the slack and get him.”

“You don’t want to catch the Ripper?”

“Of course I do. I just don’t know that I’ll catch him until he wants to be caught.”

“What if these crimes are the way that he shows himself? Will you look away?”

Will shakes his head. “I said I don’t want to talk about it anymore,” he says more firmly. “I’m exhausted and I think Abigail has the right idea sleeping the day away. I—actually, I got a headache again, and last night I was feeling a bit off. A bit like I did before. Is relapse possible?”

Hannibal frowns but strokes through his hair one last time. “I strongly doubt it, but we will monitor your symptoms. Nap now, I’m going to get back to some work I can do at home.” He retracts himself from Will’s side and backs away. Will had hoped Hannibal would stay, even lay down with him or offer some more affection.

“Right, okay.”

He curls up on the couch alone and listens to Hannibal’s footsteps grow quieter.

He wakes up to the smell of dinner and the sound of Abigail gulping back a glass of water.

"Good, you're both awake. Come. Meet me in the dining room," Hannibal says. With some groaning, Will pushes himself up, and follows Abigail who looks to be even more exhausted and stiff.

It's almost humorous to sit down at the dining room table, him and Abigail drowsy in ruffled, casual clothing while Hannibal presents them with their plates, as put together as he always is.

"Rabbit roulade au gratin with Grana Padano and baked potatoes."

Abigail lifts up her utensils slowly and pokes the meat with her fork. She looks back and forth between her plate and Hannibal.

"Something wrong, Abigail?" Hannibal asks, moving to sit at the head of the table.

"Feels kind of sad to be eating rabbits. They're so *innocent*," she says icily.

Will watches her curiously. She seemed so favorable toward Hannibal earlier, but now she looks angry. He supposes he might be out of touch with the breadth of teenage hormones, far enough past that stage of his life and without this kind of trauma.

"As innocent as any of us are trying to survive the world. Was there something else you wanted to eat?"

She looks at him slyly and then shovels a bite into her mouth to make a show of eating it.

"And would you like some wine now?" Hannibal asks, a teasing smile slowly spreading on his face. He fills his and Will's glass.

“Ugh,” Abigail says.

Will looks between them, wondering if he imagined the sudden tension. Abigail does have a habit of making crass comments to shock a room.

“Are you feeling better?” Will asks to move on with the conversation.

“No. I feel like shit. Much worse than before.”

“Abigail,” Hannibal says firmly.

“Hey, if you need to let it out, let it out,” Will says. “What’s a little swearing going to do?”

“There’s always room for politeness.”

“Debatable,” Will says with a twitch of his lip.

“Thank you. Like Alana said, you’re a bit outdated,” Abigail says.

“There is living your truth and then there is banal rudeness. Will, I would go as far as to say you have kept your southern charm and would not turn anyone away for the sake of it, as much as you don’t stay quiet in a struggle, even for your own amusement. Abigail, you are toeing the line of simply trying to push my buttons. If you have a grievance, please share it with me.”

“Oh, I am absolutely trying to push your buttons! Do you really want me to talk about my grievances right now? Lay everything out on the table? This table, in fact?”

Her voice raises steadily and then she stands abruptly, hitting her chair backward with her knees.

"I mean what is all this? Are we playing house right now? Two new dads, lucky me, this life I can expect to be shuffled to when they finally let me out of that place? Do you think we're going to run off into the fucking sunset?"

She stays standing, vibrating in her anger. Her eyes glisten with threatening tears and Will gulps back his own hurt. She's rarely what he expects when he imagines them together.

"Well. Did it feel good to let it out at least?" Hannibal asks.

"No, not really." She sits down hard and then scrapes her chair in.

"It seems rudeness isn't the solution, then," Hannibal says, flat and annoyed. Will glares at him and Hannibal's face softens slightly.

"I'm sorry, Abigail. I know how hard this all is for you. If there's anything we can do to make you feel better or more comfortable here, please, let us know," Hannibal says.

She pokes at her food hard enough to make the fork scrape against the bottom and then grimaces.

"Can I order a pizza instead?"

Will senses Hannibal stiff up as firm as a board and wonders how much self control it's taking him to keep it together after that comment.

"Yes, you can," Will says pointedly, putting a hand on Hannibal's shoulder when he stands up. "She's hungover, that's a *much* better idea. I'll take some of these leftovers if it makes you feel better."

He takes Abigail to the landline in the kitchen and leans on his elbows as he orders for them. She's scrolling through the menu on Hannibal's tablet, whispering to Will with more and more additions.

Hannibal cleans up their food and Abigail stares at him with wide, nervous eyes until finally he seem resigned. How manipulative of her, Will thinks with fondness. Hannibal opens his arms and pulls Abigail in for a hug, which she burrows into with what looks like love. Will watches from a few feet away and realizes there's something shared between them, some kind of truth he doesn't know. Maybe their love is as complicated as it seems.

No one speaks much, twiddling their thumbs in the dim kitchen while Hannibal almost compulsively cleans every surface as they wait for their pizza.

When it arrives, they eat over the kitchen counter and Hannibal stands at a distance as if he can't stand to watch.

"Have you ever ordered a pizza in your life?" Abigail asks, and again she looks light and amused, maybe a little cruel, which Will is still growing used to.

"No, I can't say that I have," Hannibal says.

"A shame, do you want a piece?" she waves a slice in the air.

"I do not. I could make you both that exact same pizza but with fresh, homemade ingredients —or *better* ingredients—and a much better oven."

"No, no, the pizza being shitty is part of what makes it appealing. It's about the association and the guilty pleasure," Will says with his mouth full.

Hannibal closes his eyes slowly.

“Just accept it. Come down to earth with us,” Will says.

“I’m here with you,” Hannibal says. “And here is where I want to be, despite my own current grievances.”

“I like it here too, even after what I said,” Abigail says. “Sorry about that. I don’t actually hate it here. It’s not so bad. I just—” she glances at Will “—yeah.”

“It’s alright if you can’t imagine a paradise here, either,” Will says. “Maybe there will never be a paradise after what you’ve been through, and I’m sorry about that, but maybe we can make something good. It’s on your terms, Abigail, and we’ll respect that.”

“I feel accepted here. You know why… but it is nice to not have to hide. That’s something, right?”

“It’s what happens with a shared understanding,” Hannibal says. “We all know what it’s like to take a life. We all know it’s far more complicated than others would have us believe. We know there is an appeal to it, a quiet rage and power that slips out of such an act. It is something that we have shared, so connected that it is almost as though we were there together as we killed.”

“It’s weird that I can talk about Nicholas Boyle here,” she says. “It doesn’t feel real sometimes.”

“You need to hold onto the reality of it,” Hannibal says. “You will want to run from it, but you can’t run from something that is already a piece of you.”

She turns her head on Will. “Do you want to run from the knowledge that you killed my dad?”

Even expecting it, he winces. “I—Well, honestly, yes.”

“But?”

“I didn’t think I could quite shake him, but I haven’t seen him for a while, so maybe I am moving on a bit.”

“Do you still feel *like* my dad because of it?”

“I, uh, try to separate it.”

“But you can’t run from something that is already a piece of you,” she quotes.

“A family wrapped up in death and grief is tied by something deeper, something stronger,” Hannibal says. “These pieces in us are tied together, and we cannot simply separate now.”

Will catches his eye and blinks away a sudden rush of emotion. He hasn’t felt the bond of family in so long he’s surprised he recognizes it for what it is, even if it’s as fragile as fine china.

“That means you’re stuck with me and Will even when we want to eat shitty junk food.” Abigail smiles and Will laughs.

“I can manage, I suppose. It seems you two have changed me just as I have changed you.”

They drive Abigail home before it’s too late and make sure she gets all the way inside. She hugs Will goodbye, but even he can recognize that it’s because she would have felt too awkward to hug Hannibal and ignore him.

Will decides to leave his car at the aquarium parking lot for another night. He sends a grateful text to his dog sitter and promises to pay extra as Hannibal drives them back to his house. He's grateful to be alone together again. He hangs onto the feeling of getting closer to Abigail, day by day, even if it's rife with difficulty.

Hannibal shuts off the lights and pulls him up the stairs with purpose. Will's heart picks up speed at the new tension in the air. Hannibal ruins it by telling him to go brush the pizza taste from his mouth, but when they finish getting ready, he enters the impressive, fire-lit master bedroom and finds Hannibal laying down with considerably less clothes on.

Will crawls on top of him, a bit in awe that this is his life now, that he can press against Hannibal's skin like this without asking. The sadness and despair and insanity go away here and he loses himself in Hannibal instead.

Hannibal's hands drag lower down his backside to grab his ass and Will tries not to flinch at the sudden roughness that begs a question.

Hannibal just kisses him though, making no further move despite the continued groping that leaves Will unsteady where he holds himself up.

"Insistent, much? If you wanna do something, just do it," Will whispers. Hannibal peers at his face as if checking his sincerity and Will raises his eyebrows in challenge.

He can't say that anal sex doesn't intimidate him, but it's better this way, when he's loose from the wine and conversation, and from the whirlwind feeling of finding a nook where he belongs and trying to cram his way in further. He doesn't want to overthink his sexuality or dig into a hole of shame. He's done that all his life for a variety of reasons and he wants this of all things to be easy, especially after hearing about the affairs Hannibal has had with men before. Will won't let them be better.

Hannibal pushes his underwear partway down his thigh and doesn't bother with any further before spreading Will's legs out over his own thighs. He reaches for a small container in his bedside drawer and Will distracts himself by kissing Hannibal's neck, trying not to get psyched out.

Hannibal pushes a finger inside of him and Will tries his hardest not to clench, as much as his body is telling him to get rid of the intrusion.

The feeling is merely strange and intrusive. Will tries to find pleasure in it, pleasure that he knows must be biologically possible for him.

The position feels more and more comfortable the longer Hannibal has his fingers pressed inside of him, slick with lube.

“Breathe in for me… then out again.”

“Don’t talk to me like I’m getting a prostate exam. Which, by the way, I don’t even have *that* much experience of this under my belt.”

“Shh.” Hannibal swiftly adds another finger.

It takes conscious effort to not get lost in the discomforting stretch and burn and before he knows it he’s rewarded with a different kind of pleasure, one he kind of wants to hit himself for never exploring before. It sneaks up on him slowly and then he shivers and the discomfort all but disappears.

Hannibal curls his fingers inside of him and rubs back and forth, varying his pressure rhythmically.

Will’s knees slip down and he rests his weight on Hannibal and lets out a small moan. It feels so *sensitive* and his thighs tremble in response.

He wraps his arm tight around Hannibal’s neck and grinds against his hip, slotting himself against the softer skin of Hannibal’s stomach. His eyesight goes blurry and a thin line of sweat over his body chills him with every light brush of air, though his limbs keep shaking

for another reason entirely. His brain turns off until he realizes he has no clue how much time has passed, but he's sure it's been at least a few minutes.

"Well? Are you going to fuck me?"

"No, I'm going to keep doing just this."

"I don't know if I can come like this."

"You're not going to. You will orgasm when I want you to."

Will lets out a breathy noise. "I want to touch you, too."

"No, you want to enjoy this. Don't question my patience. You're sensitive in everything you do, aren't you? There are no half-measures for Will Graham, in mind, body, and soul you consistently feel the entire breadth of what is being done to you. Let me in, let me give you this to feel."

Will tries to think of some retort but the thoughts dissipate more with each minute that passes. He gives in and kisses Hannibal, grinding lazily against him. Two fingers rub inside of him, and a forearm keeps his thighs spread wide. Everything feels so overwhelmingly erotic when it comes to Hannibal.

It feels like he's on the sea again, but he's the liquid this time. He ebbs and flows, drifting to the edge of a waterfall before it smooths out so he can gently glide over the current. He's the water in his stream and the water carries him further down, tossing and turning over rocks, far away from his usual spot. He drifts out in a final rush and finds himself in a wide ocean that seems to expand forever.

His body draws in a breath and on the exhale his physical self dissolves, splashing off the covers of the bed and dotting Hannibal's skin like perspiration. He pants, finding his teeth latched onto skin that isn't his. He gently pries off and feels the divots in Hannibal's shoulder

with his lips. This pleasure feels like it fills every part of his body, and it lasts and lasts in waves, each smaller than the last.

Other hands, gentle and sure hands, strip him and clean him up and move his limbs into place onto the side of the bed that is less sweaty. Almost entirely asleep, he lets it happen; he is liquid, he is moldable, and he likes each place that Hannibal moves him. He drifts off with arms around him.

Chapter End Notes

I have a little companion fic that goes through some moments in Abigail's story including the events of last night if anyone wants to read 😊
https://archiveofourown.org/works/40397607

Chapter 16

Chapter Summary

> Hannibal and Will go on a quiet date together and, to Will's chagrin, discuss the future of Will's therapy.

He wakes up and feels like he could sleep for a million more years. Hannibal allows him ten more minutes.

If Hannibal told him they fucked until the sun rose and that's why he's so tired, he would believe him, but he doesn't ask because he likes feeling like last night lasted forever.

When Will gets to his feet, as naked as the day he was born and sticky in places he really wishes he wasn't, Hannibal guides him to the ensuite bathroom.

Hannibal turns on three taps in the shower: one for the wide rain head overtop, one for the alternating jets of water from every side of the shower wall, and one for a handheld tap.

"Christ, are you trying to drown yourself every morning? Trapped in a waterfall simulation?" Will asks. Hannibal pulls Will in and the water is already skin-tinglingly hot. There's more than enough room for them to stand and clean themselves with comfort but Hannibal stays in his space and guides the handheld shower head across Will's back.

Will rests his forehead on Hannibal's shoulder as Hannibal grabs some soap.

"That doesn't smell like you," Will comments.

"I bought it for you. It's more to your style, don't you think?"

“Control freak,” Will mutters, too relaxed to care. It *is* to his tastes, but he’ll never say that outloud.

He only steps back to grab some shampoo and massage it into Hannibal’s hair, admiring the water that drips down his skin. Hannibal closes his eyes in contentedness and Will indulges in washing the rest of him, soapy water running down miles of toned skin, even more lean in their morning freshness. He could drool.

He really doesn’t know how Hannibal manages it, but half an hour after showering Will is sitting down for what must be an award-winning style of breakfast and fresh coffee, and even more dishes line the kitchen. He isn’t sure what for until Hannibal packs it into a large container—essentially a modern style picnic basket—and tells Will they’re going out.

He curls up in the heated passenger seat of Hannibal’s Bentley feeling beyond content. When he reaches his own car to drive back home, he misses Hannibal’s warmth dearly, and he supposes he can never roll his eyes at depictions of romance again. He gets it.

Hannibal is at his home when he arrives, though, just as he promised earlier. He piles the dogs into Will’s car for their afternoon date that isn’t much of a mystery anymore with that overflowing picnic basket.

Will finds them by the sea over an hour away, close enough to see the line of quiet sailboats by the shore but far enough to feel the sweet freedom of privacy in the trees. The air is still cold and salty. His dogs wander aimlessly and he leans on his elbow by Hannibal’s side and waits for the sun to peek through the clouds and warm his skin, utterly content.

“Still choosing my world, are you?” Will asks.

“I like your world very much.”

Will reaches for Hannibal’s fly and lays across the blanket they put down. Hannibal doesn’t betray much surprise on his face but Will can feel it. He rubs his palm over Hannibal’s pants before pulling down the zipper.

Hannibal looks pretty damn content, too, when Will leans forward and uses his mouth. He tastes salt and his eyes water as he lowers as far as he can go. This is pretty adventurous for him, in public where someone technically could see, but he doesn't really care. Just like he can't find it in himself to care about how unconventional any of this is. He wants to give Hannibal something back after making him feel so good last night.

It's easier to focus on what he's doing here when he's more awake and in the daylight. If there's one thing he's good at, it's figuring out how a person feels with cues that most people don't catch and that Will can't even explain. Hannibal is difficult, but Will is getting better. It means that even as Hannibal tries his best to stay poised and unaffected, Will can see right through him. He thinks—knows, really—that Hannibal likes this power over Will way more than he'd ever admit. He probably gets off to the very thought of influencing and entering Will in this way. It makes Will feel slightly self-conscious, but he can enjoy it for Hannibal's desire.

When Hannibal gets close, Will doesn't have any time to run through the logistics before Hannibal is coming into his mouth. Will swallows back, struggling to take it all, and then Hannibal lifts up his chin roughly to watch him struggle, dribbling spit and come down his chin. It feels obscene, especially under Hannibal's almost pondering gaze.

Will rolls to rest on his back, breathing in the air he sacrificed in those last few moments and stretching out his back where he was bent over for a few minutes. Despite the objective discomfort, he feels satisfied, sitting in Hannibal's pleasure as if it's his own and prideful that it was his doing.

It's a nice view from this angle; cirrus clouds, the twitching sway of branches in the wind, and a few birds overhead. Hannibal's hand finds Will's hair to play with and Will sighs. Will knows it's Hannibal expressing his pleasure and gratitude.

"You know, I left my phone in the car," Will mumbles.

"Mm?"

“I don’t want to know if Jack is calling for updates. I always used to keep it on me before, worried I wouldn’t be able to relax without knowing. Now it feels nice, knowing I can just relax. You’re inspiring me to be indulgent.”

Hannibal doesn’t reply for a moment and Will squints over at him to find a considering expression on his face rather than the casual satisfaction he had expected.

“What?” Will asks.

“You are forfeiting your old drives much easier than I expected.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“We don’t have to discuss it now.”

“Tell me.”

“Beforehand, you were adamant about your role in saving lives, and this change requires an acceptance of the killers that will destroy lives instead.”

“No it doesn’t. It means an acceptance that it’s not all on my back to do that work.”

“Ah, except you know that you are most capable of saving those lives, if not the only truly capable one. There is a heavy burden on your back, and if there wasn’t, it never would have broken you down so much.”

Will turns his head away from Hannibal and frowns at the trees. “This is always what *you* were pushing me to do.”

“Don’t mistake my observations for denouncements just because you still consider them to be your moral crimes. I do support your distance from Jack and his cyclical quests of defending America from each new killer’s blow. I am merely questioning your tactic of simplifying your dilemma into innocence on your part, because you are not innocent in the bounds of the philosophy you lived in all your life. There has never been a neutral ground for you between stopping killers and being a killer yourself by proxy.”

Will clenches his teeth to stop irrational emotions from bubbling up. He runs through arguments in his head but he worries Hannibal will call him out for lying to himself or making excuses.

“Your office looks different from this vantage point,” Will says instead, keeping his eyes on the blue sky above. A low blow, he knows.

“I mentioned the other day that I haven’t truly removed you from the spot of my patient, both officially and informally. Pretending our dynamic was automatically devoid of that therapist-patient relationship as a result of our romantic and sexual escapades was lazy on my part, and I apologize for that oversight. I had meant to bring it up again but then our attention and energy turned to Abigail. What I wanted to say was our professional cord will most effectively be cut by having you replace me with different psychiatric support, especially as it is still in my opinion that you can benefit from that avenue as you work through the dark places you’ve done so well at squashing down. It will also help me to realize that it is no longer my responsibility to do that work with you. I already have a referral set up and accepted by my colleague of interest.”

Will turns his glare on Hannibal.

“I know that is not ideal for you,” Hannibal says. “Consider it the last of my professional interventions in your life.”

“This doesn’t feel professional, actually, it feels a little personal.”

“It may be true that the personal and professional are impossible to divide now, but the goals of each side of me—wishing for the very best for you and knowing your potential—are very congruent.”

“You’re forgetting the amendment to that personal goal—that you want the best for me so that I can be good for you, *not* the mentally unstable and questionably moralled parasite I could be.”

“Everything we do in this world is inherently selfish. And don’t misunderstand me, I am not bothered by the breaking down of your vindictive principles. On the contrary, I already accept the killers of our society. Even polite society is an ecosystem of the banal and the savage, all camouflaged against our judicial background to make it through another day alive. The killers that will walk by at your discretion are the backdrop by which we can understand the destruction and the beauty of destruction in our society. They are necessary.”

Will shakes his head and looks away again. “You weren’t really there,” he whispers. “You didn’t see it everyday, how ugly it could get.”

“Some perhaps. Is it all ugly?”

The aquarium tableau enters Will’s mind. No, he supposes it isn’t, if he’s being honest. He keeps his thoughts to himself.

“Who’s this psychiatrist then?”

Hannibal finally reveals the satisfied smile that Will was waiting for before. “You met her briefly. She is the only colleague I would entrust your mental health to, as she is the only colleague I entrust *mine* to.”

Bedelia du Maurier’s house is as put together as she is, all smooth, sharp, shiny edges.

Her smile is nearly as impeccably inscrutable as Hannibal’s and she’s just as stunning as Will remembers. When Will looks her up and down it isn’t so much to check her out as to imagine

what Hannibal *really* sees when he looks at her. He dressed down for this first session as a small move of defiance, but now he wishes he had chosen differently.

She sits patiently while Will observes the room and her, circling his chair but refusing to sit.

“Hannibal’s your only patient?” he asks.

“Up until now at least. Did he tell you why?”

“You had a traumatizing experience with a patient. How did Hannibal convince you to take on a stranger like me? Did he promise to muzzle me so I don’t attack?”

The words come out more harsh than he was hoping, his attempted humor showing a bite that he can’t keep down.

“Hannibal can be very persuasive,” she says, brushing some lint off of her spotless pencil skirt.

“That he is. And why you? Is it not a conflict of interest to treat your patient’s partner?”

“The *why* might be a better question for Hannibal. But no, it is not a conflict of interest. Rare, maybe, but there can be some positives in having been introduced to you through him already. Stories need less context, and I assure you I can stay partial and avoid sharing confidential information to either of you.”

Will clenches his teeth and looks at the opposite wall. This is even worse than normal. He hasn’t even been given a chance to hide the parts of himself that he usually does. Maybe that was Hannibal’s plan. He doesn’t even want to think about what Hannibal has shared about his instability.

It’s a loss of armour to have her know everything, right down to his partnership with Hannibal, which he’d prefer to keep close to his chest. It feels wrong, like everyone else will simplify it down to the most banal bones of their intimacy.

“I’d say I don’t need this but I guess that would make me sound like I need it even more, huh? At least to a shrink’s ears. What you’re getting is way less interesting than the mess I first brought to Hannibal, though. I quit the traumatizing job that had its shackles around me. My life is very mundane now—budgeting my savings and taking care of my house while letting someone in that cares about me. It's all very fairytale.”

Doctor du Maurier smiles in a way that Will thinks means *oh he definitely needs therapy.* She does everything but write down a little note on a hidden clipboard. He imagines she’d write something like *definitely delusional, thinking he’s living in a fairytale when he can always feel the madness and the murder two steps behind him no matter how fast he walks.*

“Honestly, it feels pretty shit to be here,” he says.

“Then why are you here?” she asks.

Will shrugs. “Because Hannibal wants me to be?”

“Do you feel like he has forced you?”

Will sits down in the chair across from Doctor du Maurier and then clasps his hands in front of him.

“No. But I feel like, since I want to be a good partner for him, I should try. I should try to be stable, and if he thinks I can benefit from this, then I can do that for him. That’s why I’m here, and why I’m going to give in. But I want to express to you how much I typically can’t stand people being in my head, and maybe we can come to an agreement, work with some boundaries here.”

She smiles and looks kinder than before. “Thank you for your honesty. I do want to respect your boundaries, but I owe you the same honesty back. I am here to consider what goes on in your head and I can’t—and don’t think I should—turn that off. What I can do is make you aware of your control here.”

Will nods. “My control to tell you to eff off, in the most respectful way possible?”

“Just that.”

“I can deal with that if you can deal with me.”

“This partnership is new for you—is it also new for you to be making such a sacrifice for a partner?”

“Having a partner at all is new for me, so yes. Before you ask—how I feel about it is pretty good. Hurtful to think I might not be entirely stable in his eyes, but at the end of the day, he probably wants me to be the best I can for him to keep me around. I’ll take it.”

“You are committed,” she notes.

“I’ve… never felt this way about anyone before. That’s gotta mean something.” He barks out a laugh. “So I really can’t ask what he’s said about me here?”

“No, but you’d probably be happy to hear what he has said.”

Will catches something under the reassurance, in the way she looks away for a brief moment and sinks back into her chair, tense as the words release from her throat. Some kind of sadness, and Will can’t quite grab whatever that’s attached to. His eyebrows twitch together in confusion, but she quickly changes topic, leaving Will to wonder about all of the reasons for a reaction like that—none of them good.

He gets back to Hannibal's while he's just putting something in the oven and stripping his apron. Will walks right up to him and kisses him, grabbing the apron and setting it to the side so he can back Hannibal up into the counter.

"Welcome home," Hannibal says, stroking his jaw while they kiss.

Will flattens his hands down Hannibal's back. He pulls back and Hannibal smiles at him with adoration, eyes trailing downward then back up to his eyes.

Even *if* Doctor du Maurier has inappropriate feelings for Hannibal—and that's still an *if* because Will couldn't quite deduce what her hesitation and melancholy behind her stoic armour meant—Will has already won. Presumably, Hannibal knew Doctor du Maurier long before he knew Will and still nothing came into fruition, while Will presently has Hannibal literally wrapped around him, arms pulling him close to kiss him again.

Nonetheless, Will knows what jealousy can motivate. He knows very well, because even the thought of Doctor du Maurier getting too close to Hannibal fills him with a feeling that is spiteful and righteous.

Conventionally attractive and successful Doctor du Maurier, alone and ringless in her high ceilinged mansion. He wants to keep an eye on her.

Because here is Hannibal, probably the only person that Will's *wanted* to be around all the time. Usually Will can sort people into the categories of absolutely unbearable to be around or pleasant enough to put up with, and surprisingly few make it into the latter. For Will to feel so consistently *good* around Hannibal must mean something, and that means there are high stakes in not letting him go.

Will would try to manage his expectations as anyone should so early in a relationship, but he has difficulty lying to himself. Already he is imagining Hannibal close by for the rest of his life, restructuring the fantasy of his future around him, filling the gaps where before he worried the loneliness might eat him whole.

“Does this mean therapy wasn’t unbearable?” Hannibal asks against his lips. “And that you don’t resent me for even bringing it up?”

“My attitude was that bad, huh?” Will asks, avoiding the first question. It was pretty unbearable, but he was held over by the thought of killing two birds with one stone: making Hannibal happy, and scoping out Doctor du Maurier’s intentions without showing his cards.

“Bedelia is a good psychiatrist, and I hope she helps you see things clearer.”

“Uh-huh,” Will says quickly, looking over his shoulder. “That’s thirty minutes on the timer there? Do I get you ‘til then?” Will asks, tugging at his collar.

Hannibal follows where Will leads, smiling satisfactorily. “What was it you discussed?”

“You, mostly. How supportive you’ve been,” Will says, leading Hannibal to lay on top of him on the couch.

“Mm. I should sit in next time.”

“Your ego doesn’t need it,” Will says, unbuttoning and pushing his shirt back off of his chest. Hannibal makes a displeased *tsk* sound.

Will hurries to get Hannibal’s pants unbuttoned and starts stroking Hannibal to hardness. He kisses his neck and shoves his other hand down the back of Hannibal’s pants to grab his ass. He doesn’t have the motivation to go find lube so he just rubs against his rim tenderly, enjoying the intimacy of touching this part of Hannibal.

Hannibal nods against Will to show his approval, spurring Will on to continue with his movements.

Hannibal hovers over him, gyrating slightly against him. It’s graceful how he does it, almost like a dance, and Will can see the rippling of his muscles and the strain where he holds himself up. Even without stimulation on himself, it feels satisfying just to witness.

Will bites down on Hannibal’s neck, tonguing against his pulse like he knows Hannibal likes it. Sure enough, Will observes the telltale signs of Hannibal getting closer and speeds up.

Hannibal spills in Will’s hand, jerking until he’s spent, and then collapses down.

Will grunts at the weight. The mattress is much softer when Hannibal leans his weight down on him. This couch doesn't offer much cushioning and Will’s body compresses. He half-heartedly pushes at Hannibal’s shoulder, but Hannibal doesn’t budge.

Hannibal lifts his legs up one by one to settle on Will’s legs.

Will groans and chuckles, the movement of his chest shaking Hannibal. “What are you doing? Ow.”

“There is a kind of deep pressure therapy that often relaxes individuals, especially those on the autism spectrum. It provides proprioceptive input to soothe body stress responses.”

Will pushes up against Hannibal’s shoulders to relieve the pressure on his chest, but his thighs and lower torso press down painfully.

“With a weighted blanket maybe. You’re heavier than me. You’re heavier than you *look.*”

“You mean to tell me it’s not soothing?”

Will hits his arm and Hannibal lessens his weight but stays close. It is rather relaxing, and his heartbeat slows into a thrum.

Hannibal kisses his cheek. “If you are not open to discussing what has you tense, I understand. Thank you for seeing her.”

Will sighs out and doesn’t bother to reply, sinking under the weight and enjoying the warmth that finally makes him feel calm.

Chapter 17

Chapter Summary

> The weeks pass by in good health and blissful contentedness and Will and Hannibal find it reason to celebrate, but Hannibal begins to question their contentedness and what he wants.

Chapter Notes

> Alternate and more accurate summary: mostly just abstract conversations and fucking for a few thousand words, enjoy!

Will questions how much work Hannibal cancels over the coming weeks because they find a lot more time to spend together. Extravagant meals and long conversations by the fire and strolls with the dogs and, as promised, another outing to the theatre that isn't all that bad.

They have more sex than Will ever has with previous partners before. When they're apart, he likes to press on the bruises and aches left in his body, like tonguing a loose tooth. His mouth grows dry with the thought of all they *can* do now, as well as the other boundaries they still have yet to cross.

Jack sends him case files and Will flips through them lazily, stopping to admire the photos that don't quite capture the scene at the aquarium. The victim was a police officer, he notes, and then closes the file.

They spend one day playing Scrabble with Abigail, which she eventually gives up on and tells them to verse each other while she googles the long words she thinks they made up. She spends more time smiling that day than Will has seen on any other, and they only have one small tiff about the book deal. Abigail talks about Garret Jacob Hobbs less and stops glaring at Will so much.

He shows her short videos of Lucky on his phone, who has improved at house training and grown shockingly fast, almost at risk of knocking Hannibal clean over when he shows up. He still can't get away from the fantasy of gifting Lucky to Abigail one day.

"I believe we can support her, especially as she warms to us. We know her better than anyone," Hannibal says when they climb into his Bentley to go home.

"We can understand what she's going through," Will agrees, pulling the seat belt over his chest and then resting a hand on Hannibal's knee.

"We are all just alike. She can be a reflection of us just as much as we are to her. We are all lucky to have found each other. We don't find family as much as family finds us."

Will likes the sound of that.

They invite Alana along with Abigail for dinner one day and, plan entirely unspoken, try to convince her of their stability. It isn't that hard; they *feel* stable.

Alana is important for any future decisions to move Abigail around in the system. Unfortunately, it's hard to clear the dinner party of all awkwardness and Alana seems to have some lingering paranoia that Will can't trace. She says it's hard to tell where their boundaries are between professional and romantic, and Will probably fails to keep his displeasure off his face. Abigail trails her eyes around them and stays quiet.

"I'm back in therapy, you know," Will says. "With a psychiatrist named Doctor du Maurier, maybe you know of her? It's going well."

Alana looks surprised. "I'm happy to hear that. Hannibal had me consult with Doctor du Maurier as a PhD student so that I had an additional mentor. She's a very smart woman. Is it going well?"

“I’m getting what I need out of it,” he says. Will likes keeping tabs on the person that Hannibal sees biweekly. And if the conversations between him and Doctor du Maurier have more venom in their quips than is necessarily appropriate, no one needs to know. Will still has enough plausible deniability in his smiling compliance.

“Now you share a therapist, too? Hannibal must really trust her,” Alana says rather suspiciously.

Will chews his food roughly around a smile and feels Hannibal’s calming hand reach his knee under the table. He looks a little too satisfied.

Despite it all, things are going well. It’s perhaps most noticeable how much his life has improved when he gets the brain scan to prove it. Another visit to the doctor and the inflammation in his brain is completely gone. Treatment was a success, and relapse grows less likely by the day. His brain mends as the grievances in his life start to clear away too, one by one, and he feels lighter than he has in a long time.

“It’s cause for celebration,” Hannibal says of his newly confirmed neurological health, though Will internally feels like the social changes in his life are the most deserving of celebration.

Their dinner has long since been cleaned up and they navigated to the chairs by Hannibal’s fireplace in his room to indulge in a second bottle of wine.

“Now I at least know that all of this insanity is my own, and that it probably won’t kill me anymore,” Will says.

“I like your brand of madness.”

“Then maybe it’s good I fired you as my psychiatrist.”

Hannibal smiles and clinks their wine glasses.

Will doesn't feel that different, really. The days pass by a little drowsy and out of it, and he still has vivid dreams and the odd waking hallucinations. The other day Hannibal found him wandering into the yard following a stag that wasn't there in the dead of night, and had to lead him back inside. Regular sleepwalking, just the leftovers of his stress and trauma. Other times, Will doesn't realize the hours passing and he can't remember if he's done the things he's needed to do or if he's just been sitting staring at his workbench. Other times he doesn't remember going to bed before he wakes up groggy with a warm body pressed close.

The main difference is he doesn't feel scared anymore. The fear is gone.

"I guess I should count myself lucky that my psyche is entertaining to you instead of being some fucked up baggage," Will says.

"Anyone who doesn't recognize the value of your mind is sorely missing out."

"Oh, so the general population?"

"A shame, that the vast majority would misunderstand and judge so easily. Being unique makes it so that you are alone."

"Except for you. You understand, and you never shamed me, even when I was at my worst."

"You have no worst."

"You're unique, too. Maybe we're both alone without each other. And Abigail, of course."

"Yes," Hannibal smiles.

“Before you I used to say I was probably not gonna settle down with anyone or have a family, but I think some part of me was always waiting. I had an image in my head.”

“What was this image that you saw?”

“Well, a wife, for one. A woman who liked the kinds of things I like. And the usual. Kid or two. Dog... or seven.”

“Vague fantasies and an idealistic vision of stability?”

“No more than the idea of it, of something that one day would feel right. Can’t say I expected this to be the thing that feels right.”

“Because of me being a man or our unconventional meeting?”

“Both. The shame is hard to get away from, but you make it easier.”

Will stretches his back where he sits, sinking a bit deeper into the chair as he grows warm and tired.

“Are you sore?” Hannibal asks.

“I’m pretty much always sore, you know that. But I fiddled with my neighbor's engine for a few hours this morning, so you could say it’s worse than usual.”

“This is a good segue to my next plan I had for celebrating your good news. Will you strip and lay on the bed? On your stomach.”

Will doesn't need to be told twice. He pulls off his shirt as he stands up, but stops and folds his clothes on the chair because he knows Hannibal will fix it if he doesn't.

"A massage, then? I thought you were going to offer me celebratory sex tonight."

"Well, I'm also going to offer you that."

"Good, had to check." Will smirks.

He lowers himself down on top of Hannibal's covers. Hannibal leaves and returns undressed and carrying a small candle that he lights and sets on the side table. He turns off the rest of the lights.

Hannibal sits right on Will's lower back so he couldn't move if he tried. He runs his fingers through Will's hair first, half-scratching and half-massaging until chills are running up and down Will's spine. He almost feels like he could cry at the affection already.

When Hannibal stops, Will looks back to see Hannibal tilting the candle over his upper back.

He braces for the dripping heat that is just past the point of comfort. It cools into a manageable warmth that Hannibal spreads over his skin. The candle wax doesn't feel like normal wax, instead like some kind of oil that makes Hannibal's hands glide across his skin.

Hannibal starts with his shoulders. He rubs Will's shoulders often, without asking and at any odd time, but when Hannibal presses his fingers into his muscles, Will knows this time is going to be different. He grits his teeth in pain and eventually grunts in displeasure.

Hannibal lessens his pressure only slightly. "It feels like you haven't relaxed since the day you were born." He digs back in again.

"That's entirely possible."

“Try to relax.”

“I *am*.”

Hannibal spreads his palms on either side of his spine and then presses against him, *hard*, releasing a loud popping noise, as well as a moan from the back of Will’s throat.

“God, okay, fuck, you’re hired as my chiropractor, too.”

Hannibal rubs his hands up and down his back for a minute before starting to dig into his muscles again.

“But that hurts. I assumed a celebratory massage would feel good.”

“It will feel good later. It is after suffering that one finds peace. It is something that I am trying to relearn: you must break something down to build it up stronger. Contentment exists in stillness, but euphoria will come from digging deeper and withstanding the pain.”

“What are you breaking down?” Will asks, voice strained from the hands pressing on his lungs.

“Everything gets broken down eventually, our selves shattering off into splinters only to be put together in a more beautiful creation. It shouldn’t be a thing to fear, it is the way of the universe, of ever increasing entropy and the expansion of ourselves. Disorder isn’t loss, it is growth and honesty.”

“Sounds painful.”

“Pain and suffering are what we need to bear to face life bravely. Scars over scars to create an impenetrable casing over vulnerable flesh, binding atoms together.” He digs into Will’s previously injured shoulder particularly harshly and Will grips the blankets and breathes quickly through his teeth.

“Christ, too much.”

“It will all be for the best in the end. You have never had a proper massage, have you?”

“No.”

“I want you to experience indulgence at the forefront of everything you do. I want you to feel alive and I want you to feel good without shame.”

Will doesn’t reply for a few moments, concentrating on handling the pain. Hannibal moves further down his back, pressing near his spine.

“Ah. And what’s this about honesty?”

“About living your truth, sharing the parts that don’t come to your tongue as easily as others.”

“You haven’t been entirely honest with me I don’t think,” Will says.

Hannibal’s hands pause for only a moment and then continue. “No?”

“Your story did not begin in the orphanage, and your life did not jump immediately to medical school and success.”

“Is the sin of omission the same as a lack of honesty?”

“It feels like it with you. I have asked you to be vulnerable before. You could try a little harder,” he says, a little sadly. He wants to harbor every piece of Hannibal but he feels strongly like something is missing. He has been hoping for a story about Hannibal’s sister, but he has never mentioned her since the time he told Will about her.

“Some doors are harder to open, as I’m sure some of yours are.”

“Can we break down the pieces if we’re not even whole yet?” Will asks.

“We can and we should. With new perspectives and time our concepts of each other will stir together in beautiful vibrancy to create something new, something messy.”

“A very vulnerable thing, to share those ugly colors.”

“It is. That’s why we are so breakable.”

Will grunts. “Be a bit more gentle with me, then.”

Hannibal sits back on his thighs and presses against Will’s lower back just as grindingly hard. “I don’t hold back.”

Will gulps but doesn’t know what to say. It seems like they’re talking about something else entirely.

“Relax now. Focus on the sensations.”

Hannibal massages his back for a long time and then finally digs into the muscles on his arms. He turns Will over for a time and works on his shoulders and his pecs. He then moves all the way down to work on his feet, up his legs and flips him over again so he can knead right into his ass.

Will doesn't know how long it lasts, but Hannibal takes his time on each inch of him. His muscles all seize up in pain until Hannibal moves on, after which his limbs relax into a blissful relief that makes it feel as if he's floating. Tears slip out of his eyes and the room blurs into a mass of warm lighting and familiar shapes that he doesn't care to focus on.

It's like Hannibal has pulled apart his muscles and hung them up on a line to let the wind flow through him.

He knows the basic science, that a massage will stimulate his autonomic nervous system and release some happy hormones, but he didn't quite expect this euphoria. When Hannibal's movements finally slow and he shifts in satisfaction, Will tugs on Hannibal's forearm until he lays down on Will's back in a crushing hug.

"Sometimes I feel like there has to be a catch," Will sighs.

"Oh?"

"Yeah, no one can be this good."

Hannibal doesn't reply and Will realizes he probably sounds dumb saying this. He rubs along Hannibal's forearm. He likes his arms even more now.

"Maybe it's the doors you haven't opened yet, maybe it's the secrets you haven't divulged. It's early, but I can handle that all, too. It will make you feel more human," Will says.

"I don't feel human?"

Will gulps. “I don’t know. Sometimes—” He squeezes his eyes shut. “I don’t know. Weird imagination. I’m just rambling. My brain is mush.”

Hannibal doesn’t pry. He moves off of Will instead. He digs out a pillow from the bed and fits it under Will’s hips so his back arches. He feels very exposed now. He starts rambling even more.

“Don’t get me wrong, though. You’re very human.”

“Oh?”

“Yeah. You’re a control freak, cruel probably even to the point of being sadistic, some kind of superiority complex and very vain, you’re judgmental, greedy.”

“Ah,” Hannibal sounds offended. Will laughs.

“Get over it. I’m trying to tell you I like you more for all of it. I’m done talking now. You’ve turned me into a rambling mess.”

“And you use your rambling to say rude things.”

“It would take too long to say all the nice things. I can offer something else.” He presses back with his hips.

“You’re a greedy boy yourself.”

“You can tell me my flaws if you want, but at least do something nice during it.”

“I imagine that I would adore whatever you consider to be your flaws.”

“And hate what I consider to be my strengths?”

“Don’t be smart.” Hannibal pinches his ass hard enough that Will jerks in pain.

“Make me,” he says. Hannibal picks up the candle again and drips it right over Will’s ass, just too hot for comfort, but Will grips the sheets and endures it.

Hannibal pushes inside of Will with his fingers faster and harder than he needs to, and Will bites back a complaint, not wanting to hear more about the necessity of suffering, or the bit of sadism he’s observed from Hannibal. He’s noticed it already, increasing over the last few times they’ve been together.

Hannibal doesn’t need to bruise his wrists or his hips to get Will to stay still, he just does it because he wants to. He doesn’t need to bite either, but he clearly tries to leave marks on Will. He pushes Will’s limits, too, like he’s always trying to surprise a noise out of him. Will isn’t complaining. Sometimes genuine fear flashes through him, fear of what he isn’t sure, but it fades as fast as it comes and he’s left with a thrumming adrenaline that heats his skin. He takes it all as permission to do the same back, bite and press and even slap his thighs sometimes, and there’s a specific kind of pleased smile he can get out of Hannibal in those moments, so he keeps doing it.

Hannibal still hasn’t fucked him, though. Hannibal uses his fingers and massaging toys often on Will, sometimes sucking him off at the same time like it is his personal mission to overwhelm him after discovering how sensitive and disoriented he gets. Will does feel spoiled, and it seems like every time they do it, it just feels better and better. He still wants to see Hannibal lose control like him. He wants to give Hannibal this.

He feels hard, silicone vibrations press against him, and he leans back and slaps at Hannibal’s hand. Hannibal freezes at the action.

“You’re a control freak, you know that? Talking about us learning to be vulnerable together. Just fuck me properly.”

Hannibal looks a bit surprised, but he puts the toy to the side. When Will looks back, the gleam in his eye suddenly turns smug.

Hannibal pulls Will up rather roughly onto his knees, pressing against his back.

“Do it yourself if you want it so bad.”

Will breaks out of his grip and pushes Hannibal down, turning and crawling over him. Hannibal tries to sit up but Will pushes him down by his throat where his head hangs off of the side of the bed. He stays there with enough insistence from Will.

Will grabs a scoop of oil, and considers the condoms in the drawer nearby. It would keep things cleaner, but he wants Hannibal to fill him up.

He jerks Hannibal to full hardness and slicks him up. He crawls over him, lining up. Hannibal is bigger than the toys he has used. Hannibal didn’t finger him for that long, either, and he’s not particularly relaxed anymore. He has something to prove, though, and giving up would lead to a different kind of powerplay, so he starts to sink down.

Will’s legs start shaking quickly with the effort and he has to stop. It hurts. It’s pain he’s not used to, this burning, intrusive stretch.

He forces himself to move again, sitting down inch by inch while gritting his teeth. Hannibal appraises him, looking up and down. Predatory, Will thinks. He looks at Will like he’s a piece of meat.

It seems to take forever to bottom out, but when he’s finally sitting on Hannibl’s hips, he lets out a long breath and tries to get himself together. The stretch burns, but once he’s in, there’s also something strangely comfortable about being so filled up. He avoids Hannibal’s eyes and gulps back the saliva in his throat to avoid getting overwhelmed. Hannibal has done this for him, and he can manage anything he can.

He starts to move, just small gyrations up and down, forward and back, grinding their skin together. It feels *good*. Shivers break out across his body when he realizes how close they are, Hannibal deep inside of him like how Will's been inside of him.

He speeds up, keeping a difficult rhythm that makes his heart rate pump.

Will gives in. "Hannibal," he whines.

"Mm?"

"Please?"

Hannibal sits up and sends them both backward until he's on top. He bends Will's legs up toward his chest and then starts fucking roughly into him, deeper each time. It feels impossible to hold back all noises. Will's whines are mumbled by him pressing his lips together but his voice still carries over the obscene noise of their skin slapping together, punctuated by a grunt each time Hannibal slams against him. He scrambles for something to hold onto, yanking the sheets out of place.

It's not *not* degrading after all, he thinks. He should have known Hannibal would never go easy on him. He's admitted as much himself just tonight: he doesn't hold back.

Will doesn't have it in himself to be ashamed, not when it feels like this. His eyes glaze over and all there is left is the sensations and the dream world he seems to enter when Hannibal touches him. It feels like he's been waiting to be fucked just like this his entire life, too empty and wanting to be filled up with something else.

It's monstrous, and a little exciting to think about the potential that Hannibal has. Will has spent hours and hours with Hannibal now but he still often appears like a smoke screen with something timeless and mysterious beyond. Will has a vague image of him now, which has slipped through usually while they have sex and Hannibal begins to indulge his true colours. Will has the scratches from his claws and the puncture marks from his sharp teeth. He sees

the shadow of his antlers rise far above their bed and is sometimes convinced that he's been impaled by them until the fantasy dissipates. He sees it now, as if it were a blurry image in his peripheral that he can't quite focus on: skin as dark as the night sky and eyes gleaming like stars.

The image is growing more clear the more Hannibal begins to give up control to fuck Will how he wants to. It might be the clearest image Will has ever gotten of him, and it starts to make more sense why Hannibal hasn't done this before despite how much he clearly enjoys it.

He keeps his hips snapping consistently until Will is close to asking for mercy, but then he slows down and pulls out. Will feels like a rag doll when Hannibal turns him over and props his hips up on the pillow to enter him from behind, pushing his head into the sheets. Hannibal bears down harder into his prostate and Will feels dizzy.

Will turns his head to the side where the small flame from the candle lights over them. In the shadow on the wall he sees two large masses protruding from Hannibal. They reach high and branch off into sharp forms like daggers tied together. They move back and forth in increasing speed as though trying to puncture something, but it's only the thrusting body, the figure that looks less and less human the more he stares. It hurts, too big and too hard with hip bones bruising his thighs, and the weight on his chest takes his breath away. Nails dig into his arm and he wonders what Hannibal is going to try and break apart.

He lets it happen, lets his body unravel and lay floating, untethered from everything except for the figure digging into his skin.

Hannibal is relentless. As good as it feels, Will doesn't think he can come just from this. It's an exciting prospect: he wonders how long Hannibal could keep fucking him for, keeping them trapped in this sphere of pain and pleasure on the verge of tipping over.

When it starts to feel too frustrating, Hannibal pulls him up on his knees and whispers, "*Touch yourself.*" Will hurries to follow instructions and wraps his hand around himself. It takes no time at all for the pleasure to reach its peak, ripping out of Will with the first fierce stimulation and spreading through him from head to toe.

Will makes a mess of the sheets below and then bows forward when he's spent, holding himself up on the bed frame as he pants. He is overly aware of Hannibal still inside of him, stretching him open and pressing where he's far too sensitive now. He twitches and hisses, but Hannibal merely holds him close, not pulling out. It's a question. Is Will going to make Hannibal hold back, or let him cross each boundary no matter the pain?

Will nods, blinking against his exhaustion.

"Finish," he commands into the silence of Hannibal's overbearing patience, reaching back to touch the hip pressed against his own.

Hannibal gently lays Will back down on the bed, tucking the pillow back under his hips so it's centered. Will tries not to relax too much into the gentleness—it will only make the pain more overwhelming.

Hannibal starts fucking into him again, gentleness quickly turning into the primal roughness from before, their skin rubbing together more painfully. Hannibal pulls out for a moment to add more lube, and the lack of mass inside of him is just as harrowing as the intrusion is, and overwhelming once again when he's filled up. Without the haze of his arousal, Will feels far more uncomfortably aware of what is happening to his body.

Will focuses on Hannibal's indulgence and power, and how he somehow always gets to take what he wants.

Will was never that sexual of a person before, with a number of sexual experiences born out of obligation and a desire for normalcy rather than a real craving for sex. At times he looked at porn videos not unlike a baffled field researcher, wondering if he would ever know that same passion, or if anyone really does. Wondering what it might be like to want to be fucked into humiliation and pain.

He considers himself as if looking from a distance, at this new and not entirely unwelcome desire in his gut. He *gets* it now, because it's coming from Hannibal, and it's giving Hannibal pleasure. To be used in the hands of someone he trusts and wants to spoil.

Hannibal presses his mouth to the back of Will's neck and breathes in through his nose. Ever indulgent, almost hedonistic in consuming what he can of Will.

Will is uncomfortably sensitive but it's appealing to have his body in Hannibal's hands, for Hannibal to mould him how he wants to. The sensations rut Will into the mattress and against the headboard and he almost thinks his arousal could return in full if this went on for long enough. He kind of wants it to last.

Hannibal jerks and comes eventually, draping across Will's back and pressing down his lungs. Will struggles to breathe and his eyes flutter at the strange wetness filling his insides. He hisses again against the sheets when Hannibal pulls out. He twists his hips around uncomfortably.

"Shh, stay, I will clean you," Hannibal says breathlessly, resting above him for another moment.

He wouldn't even dream of protesting that. He stays curled up on Hannibal's bed until the weight on his thighs returns along with a warm cloth. Gentle and caring again, his monster putting him back together so he will be able to take him apart again and again in the future.

It's only after he has been meticulously cleaned that Will rolls over with a sigh and a grunt. Will appraises Hannibal's reddened cheeks.

"See, wasn't that better?" He says with humor and a wince.

Hannibal returns his smile. "I very much enjoyed myself."

"I know you did, you didn't hold back. I feel like a piece of metal on a blacksmith's anvil."

"You are an artisan's creation in my eyes," Hannibal says, leaning closer and clearly excited about his metaphor. "And I think I can make you more beautiful than before."

That’s not exactly a compliment and Will isn’t even sure what it means, but he’s too tired to banter back. He feels a bit like he’s floating and he wants to sleep, but Hannibal lays down heavy on his front, kisses up his neck and face, and whispers in his ear.

“Will?”

“Mm?”

“I have one last present for you, if you will accept.”

“Jeez, no way, I’m thirty-six, what do you think I’m capable—”

“Shh, shh, not that. Go away with me for the weekend. I have somewhere you can take your dogs if you’d like.”

“Oh. Yeah, sure, I’d like that a lot.”

“Good. Now rest. The time will come.”

Hannibal kisses his face again and Will stops trying to keep his eyes open.

Chapter 18

Chapter Summary

Will has a concerning conversation with Alana and his paranoia grows.

Chapter Notes

warning for choking/erotic asphyxiation in this chapter! dubious consent tag is relevant here too. enjoy!

The next day, Will is surprised to wake up to a text from Alana asking to meet and talk about the last Chesapeake Ripper case. He thinks there's something else, and Hannibal might as well, judging by his interest in the text.

Will's curiosity pushes him out of the house despite his very particular *soreness* and to a quiet coffee shop between their houses. He returns her hug and looks around her person for where she might be keeping files.

"You didn't ask me here to talk about the Chesapeake Ripper, did you?"

She gives him a small smile, clearly not trying to hide it. "We can talk about the case too, but I know you've stepped back from all of that. And I'm happy that you stepped back! I did promise Jack I would ask you, with the caveat that *he* wouldn't ask you, so you know there's no real pressure from me."

"I appreciate it. I'd rather hear about whatever it was you wanted to talk about."

"I'm worried about Abigail," she says.

“Oh?”

“Price and Zeller found out she was at the place where one of the girls was abducted on her university tour. They’re going to check the rest of the scenes.”

“They think she was the lure?”

“She might have been the lure. But she’s still a victim.”

He wants to think Abigail would have told them, but he doesn’t feel very certain of that right now. “The justice system might not agree.”

Alana shakes her head. “I’m worried a warrant for her arrest could come any second now. I don’t know what to do. It would ruin her life.”

“Even if I can’t, Hannibal could afford to get her the best lawyer there is. He’s not going to give up on her.”

She nods. Slow, hesitant movements.

“Why isn’t he here today for this conversation, Alana? You still don’t trust him?”

“I want to trust him, and I always have. I’m just… I don’t know, I’m questioning what I know of Hannibal these days. And I want to be wrong. Maybe it’s because Jack keeps calling me in for profiles now that you’re gone. Paranoid is my middle name. I’m having nightmares and I’m feeling so guilty over Abigail and… just everything. She’s a victim, we need to listen to her. And I’m worried that maybe you’re too close to him to see it.”

“What did Abigail say?”

“Weird things…. Concerning things.”

“What did she say?” he asks again.

“Well first I mentioned referring her elsewhere and she was very upset. She felt abandoned.”

“Referring her?” Will pauses and furrows his eyebrows. “She has not so friendly feelings for you, doesn’t she?”

Alana nods. “She’s had so little go right in her life, I believe she latched onto what she had—and that was me offering comfort. I would classify it as an obsession rather than genuine feelings. I want to be there for her especially because I know she’s confused, but at the same time, I can’t be the only thing she latches onto, in ways she can’t ever have. I won’t stop going to see her, but I have to balance that.”

It feels like a dig at him and Hannibal, but he pushes on with an understanding voice. “What did she say that was worrying?”

“It was during some sort of emotional outburst, so it wasn’t exactly clear. She asked if I was abandoning her for Hannibal’s care and I asked her what she meant, and she said she didn’t know if she really wanted her own ‘dad 2.0.’ Then she told me I should be more careful stepping on his toes.”

“Garret Jacob Hobbs 2.0?”

“I asked and she told me to forget it.”

“She does want you to stay pretty badly, though, doesn’t she? Who knows what she would say to make that happen.”

“There was another thing. You know the night of the aquarium murder? Didn’t you say that Hannibal was at yours? All the way in Wolf Trap?”

“Yeah?”

“She said something about when she saw Hannibal ‘that night’ and then corrected herself after. I questioned her on it and she denied it, but… well I think I am catching onto some of her tells for lying, let’s just say that.”

“That’s impossible though, I would have… I mean why would he even go there? She *was* intoxicated, traumatized… she might have thought he was there, for sure, while needing a crutch.”

“Do you ever think she looks kind of scared around him?” Alana asks.

“No? He seems closer to her than I am.”

“Yeah, but still scared. I noticed it when we had dinner. There’s something in her eyes, you don’t see it?”

“Maybe you should consider stepping back from Jack and all the cases. Just like I did.”

“I might. But I’m going to talk to her again and also Jack first. If she feels like Hannibal might hurt her… we need to listen.”

He clears his throat. “Yeah, you should talk to her. She looks up to you, she trusts you.” Internally, he can’t imagine she would say anything like that.

“I want her to, if only I didn’t have to worry that she’s too attached to me,” Alana smiles sadly.

“Poor Abigail.”

“I’m worried about how attached to Hannibal you are, too.”

“We’ve been over this, Alana.”

“You’re not working, you spend a lot of your time with him now, don’t you? You seem out of it, you seem… different.”

“I’m happy. I’m healthy.”

“You don’t look that healthy, honestly. You look a bit out of it.”

“I was up late last night.”

“I don’t want to be the priss trying to ruin everyone’s fun. I hate being that. I just have this bad feeling like I don’t know who everyone is. I’m worried. I don’t know how much I should trust my instincts. You’re better at it than I am, though, and that’s why I wanted to talk to you. What is your instinct telling you?”

“Alana, maybe the problem is that you keep trying to save everyone. I don’t need saving.”

She frowns. “You’re just my friend. I want to keep it that way, and not make all this worse because I keep saying the wrong things.”

“I know. I want us to be friends, too.” Even as he says it, he’s not entirely certain it’s true.

“Please don’t talk to Hannibal about this, okay? We’ll just keep it between us. I’ll talk to Abigail and try to clear my worries. And I’m not going to tell you to stop seeing him, I just want you to be careful.”

He nods.

“And don’t tell her either. She needs to come out on her own terms. I don’t want her to lose the only people she has.”

Will lies to Hannibal for the first time when Hannibal turns up at his home. He tells him the meeting with Alana was nothing to worry about. He doesn’t want to think about it. He doesn’t want to consider why he feels an itching of dread. He doesn’t want to wonder why it still feels a bit like he’s acting in a play when he sits down to eat dinner with Hannibal. He just wants to see what happens first.

He wants to see what happens to such an extent that he invites Hannibal to bed.

“Sometimes I feel like you’re holding back on me,” Will says, tugging on his arm.

“Holding back in what manner?” Hannibal asks, kissing his neck gently.

Will considers saying *everything,* but he doesn’t particularly want to get into that conversation: that he isn’t entirely certain that he knows who Hannibal is.

“Sometimes it’s like I can feel your desire, like the sharp end of a blade, but you hold back. Poised, even when you look from the outside to be just following your instincts.”

“Hm.” Hannibal kisses his neck some more, leaving it wet.

“What if I wanted to see you expose your darkest desires?”

Hannibal pauses, his eyes flicking up to him and then back down to his neck. “Do you?”

“Give me something at least.”

“What would you like?”

“A taste of your cruelty. I know it’s there.”

“Just a taste? I cannot promise that what I give you won’t flow hot down your throat and fill your stomach.” With that, Hannibal touches Will’s throat and Will catches the hint.

Will nods. “Whatever you want.”

Hannibal’s face seems to change, even though from the outside he still looks neutral and calm. His hand tightens on Will’s neck.

“Are you sure?”

“Yes. What is it you want to do?”

“I want to see how well you follow the rules. I see the desire in your eyes. If you are feeling masochistic, then I will give you this.”

“I wouldn’t say I’m feeling like that,” Will retorts.

“Mm,” Hannibal says, in a casual way that clearly shows he doesn’t believe Will. Will isn’t too sure, either.

Will fears the monster that he has been imagining is real, and he fears how much he wants to see it again. He has a good reason to get a glimpse of it this time, though.

Hannibal reaches to the side and grabs the lube, unclipping it and covering one hand, moving it around in his palm to warm it up. He’s almost mechanical as he unbuttons Will’s pants and pushes them down just enough. Will lays back on the bed.

“Let’s try something new,” Hannibal says.

Will thinks agreeing to this is probably one of his worst ideas, but he lays there and waits in anticipation.

“Here is what you will do,” Hannibal says, stroking Will to hardness in an almost casual, compulsory manner. “I will cut off your airway with my hands. I will tell you a number, and you will count to that number in your head, and when you get to it, you will tap on the back of my hand and I will release you. Understand?”

Will gulps. “I understand.”

“Are you comfortable?”

Will feels entirely unsettled, but he nods his head anyway. He is intrigued.

“Good. I will begin,” he says in a strangely clinical tone. It’s the control, Will realizes. Even sleeping together is probably at least partially an act, or at least a more forceful reconstruction on Hannibal’s part to appear more human and reciprocal, when really he’d probably prefer to list his rules and have his way.

Hannibal says, “Five,” and then wraps both hands around Will’s neck.

The sensation is immediately overwhelming, so incongruent to the casual way that Hannibal grabs him. Will’s eyes pop open and his hands reflexively go to Hannibal’s wrists to fight for his airway back. The panic makes it feel like he’s out of breath already.

He needs to follow instructions, though. He did this to himself, and he intends to go through with it. Will counts, trying not to go too fast in his head out of panic. He taps gently and Hannibal releases then goes back to stroking him.

“Good. Exactly that. Again now: ten.”

His hands squeeze around his neck, big enough to cover all of his skin and hard enough to press the back of his head further into the sheets. The most intimidating thing might be how Hannibal looms over him and holds eye contact without any discernible emotions on his face. Will wonders what he’s thinking. He’s used to not knowing but it never fails to be frustrating.

Ten seconds, especially in his anxiety, feels very difficult. He taps on the back of Hannibal’s hand when time is up, and then Hannibal lets him go. Will gasps in.

“Good. I assume you have the hang of it now. Again: ten.”

Hannibal continues, squeezing his neck for ten to twenty seconds and then pausing to let Will catch his breath. He touches him in between, only enough to keep Will aroused.

He doesn’t know if Hannibal would stop if he asked. They never discussed that. They probably should have discussed that.

It gets easier to keep up when he gets used to it, but Will still finds himself breathless to the point of discomfort. It is rather tedious for such an extreme kink.

Hannibal moves forward a bit to sit down right over his hips. The weight is a nice bit of stimulation, but not *enough*.

"Good?" Hannibal asks. Will nods, but feels a bit more fear than before. Hannibal checking in on him sounds like things might escalate.

"Ten," he says, and that isn't anymore extreme, he thinks, confused.

Hannibal squeezes his neck, Will counts, and taps. Hannibal gives up enough for Will to breathe in once, and then immediately tightens again.

"Ten."

Will counts, taps, and then Hannibal does the same thing, allowing him to breathe for only the few necessary seconds to take in a gasp before tightening just enough to block out all of his air.

"Ten."

It repeats, again, and again, and again, and Will's eyes start bulging out without enough time to fill his lungs. When it finally ends for a more extended period, he starts coughing and clutches onto Hannibal's thighs.

Before he can get back to a normal level of breathing again, Hannibal does it again.

"Fifteen."

Hannibal is incessant, squeezing, loosening his grip for about three seconds, and then repeating. Will's face feels hot and his lungs are starting to burn, and he doesn't know how

much longer he can go. He kicks frantically against the sheets.

When finally he lets up for a bit longer, Will gasps, “Hannibal, *Hannibal*.”

Hannibal waits, seemingly for some kind of request to stop, but Will doesn’t say more. Against his own expectations, he is rock hard and blurry with arousal. Or, maybe blurry with a lack of oxygen, but past the point of being able to tell the difference.

It’s just how powerful Hannibal seems above him. When his eyes fail to focus on the scene above him, he sees that tall, imposing creature again, antlers rising high. There may be no extent to Hannibal’s darkness. He is the epitome of darkness, some fallen angel, who could deliver pain that Will has never been able to conceive before—

His eyes are still wide with desperation for air when Hannibal squeezes his neck again, a bit tighter than before, exposing some of his excitement.

“Fifteen.” And again. And again. And again.

“Fifteen.”

Will finds himself slipping into a dangerous territory. Would Hannibal let him pass out? Would Hannibal do just about anything short of killing Will? Would Hannibal have the capacity to kill him?

Will taps and Hannibal doesn’t release his neck. The panic rises.

Without letting go, Hannibal says, “You counted too fast, start over now. Fifteen.”

Without the small relief, Will enters the danger zone. He keeps tapping, then tries tugging at Hannibal’s hands, to no avail. He’s too dizzy to count, and time starts slipping away into nothing he can perceive.

“You’re not counting. Try again. Start from fifteen now.”

In his last attempt to save himself, Will taps with his pointer finger fifteen times, trying to keep a rhythm as reality slips away in front of his eyes. It’s the clearest picture he gets of the monster. The stagman is even taller than Hannibal with thin, charcoal skin over sharp bones that suggests malnourishment, but Will knows it’s just depravity and greed. His eyes are black and his mouth expressionless.

Will gets to fifteen and finally taps against Hannibal desperately, smacking at him with both hands in excitement, he made it, he *did,* and the monster has an expression now: he’s *proud.*

Hannibal releases his throat and the second Will breathes in, wheezing hard enough that a whistle sound emerges, he comes, *hard*.

He grinds up against where Hannibal sits over his crotch, gyrating desperately in his relief. Hannibal gets a hand on him, pumping out what’s left, but Will is mostly spent almost with no stimulation, and he’s still panting in high-pitched, pained whines.

“Wow, okay, *wow,*” he exclaims, because he never expected to come that hard until it exploded from him. It’s a strangely pleasurable, heady feeling that he’s never experienced before. He imagines the adrenaline coursing through his brain, overwhelming his brain that has just been deprived of blood. He drops his arms above his head to try to expand his lungs and breathe in the much needed air.

Hannibal chuckles and caresses his cheek with his thumb affectionately.

“You did exceptionally well,” Hannibal says, and Will feels warm inside from receiving his pride. That’s new too.

“Thank you for letting me see you,” Will says through his panting. He holds Hannibal’s eye contact even as Hannibal stills and watches him warily.

Hannibal leaves and returns shortly with a washcloth and a whiskey. Will stares into the golden liquid, wondering if he's imagining the clouding he sees. He drinks it anyway. He sips slowly and enjoys being cleaned up by Hannibal, and when he finishes, Will pulls him in to sit resting against the headboard together, closer than usual, clinging to his torso and listening to the beat of Hannibal's heart through his chest.

Soon enough, Will begins to feel a cloud of exhaustion wash over him. It's not a surprise, he can admit that, and this has been happening a lot more than he'd like to acknowledge. Tiredness that isn't quite normal, overtaking his mind and body until he couldn't possibly fight it.

"Hannibal?" Will asks.

"Yes, Will?"

Will can't get anything out past his heavy tongue, though. His heart beats faster and Alana's words rush through his mind.

He shakes his head and tries to say *no* but it comes out as a moan.

"Are you feeling alright?"

Will shakes his head again.

"Then let me help you lay down. Perhaps it was all the whiskey."

Will wants to say that he didn't drink that much, but now he's not sure. Did he? Is he only paranoid? Maybe Alana's words are getting to him too much.

Hannibal helps him scoot down so he can lay flat. Will wishes he could talk. He wants to tell Hannibal not to ruin what they have. He wants to tell him to put the pieces back together. If Hannibal can pretend, then so can Will. He can pretend for a long time.

It would be worth it because he doesn't think he's ever been this happy with anyone before. He should have known there would be a catch. He wants the fairytale to continue a while longer, it's only been a few weeks. He feels a prick on his inner forearm and fails to keep himself awake any longer as he drifts off into the darkness.

Chapter 19

Chapter Summary

Will wakes up to a note and a call from Jack.

Chapter Notes

2 chapters today because i decided to keep the cliffhanger torture to a minimum 😉 enjoy!

Will wakes with a gasp and kicks his legs out from under an unnerving weight until he realizes it's just his comforter. He rolls over and finds Hannibal's spot empty and cold. It takes some effort to sit up and find the note left on the side in pretty, cursive writing.

Will,

Look not in my eyes, for fear

They mirror true the sight I see,

And there you find your face too clear

And love it and be lost like me.

Eat well from the feast I have left you, and please join me for dinner later.

Yours truly,

Hannibal

It isn't uncharacteristic to wake up to a borderline nonsensical letter when Hannibal goes to the office, but Will barely has the ability to comprehend this one before his phone rings. His heart beats a little faster than usual when he answers it.

"Another Chesapeake Ripper scene," Jack says in lieu of a hello. Will can hear the strain in his voice.

"Oh."

"I'd appreciate it if you can get here fast. Please."

Will hangs up and stumbles out of bed, trekking through the dogs that swarm his legs. He grabs a glass of water to soothe his dry mouth and when he puts it down, he drops his hand much faster than he meant to and shatters the glass on the counter.

He swears and quickly snaps at the dogs to stay away from the puddle of glass. Lucky comes closer against his command and he kicks her away hard enough to make her skid a couple feet across the floor, eliciting a yelp, which he immediately feels guilty for. The glass will hurt her more, though, so he makes a *tch* noise and she leaves with her tail lowered.

He bends down and stops with his head against the cabinet for a moment to breathe in and out. He feels disoriented and confused, like all of the barriers in his mind have collapsed. His mouth is dry and his head is foggy and he doesn't know if he can ignore those symptoms.

He needs to figure out what to do. Whatever he does will affect Abigail, too, because Will can't financially support her like Hannibal can, especially through a legal battle. Maybe that's just an excuse, though. He doesn't *want* to do anything for once. He wants to pretend.

He tries and tries to push it away. He imagines himself standing in his stream, but when he looks down he realizes he forgot his waders. He's naked, actually. And the water is thick and hot, and stains his skin red.

He opens his eyes again and cleans the glass up as fast as he can, shoving it in the trash. He hopes he doesn't forget about it later and cut himself.

The longer he waits, the longer he will have to stew in his own mind so he quickly takes care of his dogs and runs out the door.

An hour later, Will stands at the entrance to a large, empty house. It's a shell of framing lumber and drywall, mirroring the rest of the homes in this developing neighborhood. The houses should all be empty except for leftover construction materials, but in this one he can see that the room to his left has been decorated. Jack stares at him from 15 feet away and Will doesn't move until Jack comes to retrieve him.

"Are you okay?" Jack asks.

"Just steeling myself for this one."

Jack claps his back. "It's good to see you again, Will, but not in these circumstances. Is it possible that even the Chesapeake Ripper is escalating? I've never seen anything like this."

"If… if he has a reason to, yeah."

"What reason would that be? You know what, forget it, I'll let you look first."

Will forces himself across the space as the rest of the police and forensics experts stream out of the room. There is a curtain hung around the walls, hiding the scene. He turns around to watch Jack lower the curtain, leaving him alone.

The dark curtains hang from ceiling to floor, blocking out most of the light. A massive dining room table takes up most of the room, piled with what Will can only describe as a feast.

Platters of food are scattered across the surface, cold, he notes with a hand skimming across. Slithering between the plates are firm tentacles that Will has to make sure aren't moving, interspersed with vibrant flowers bursting out of their spots and an array of fruit, cut pomegranate and shining grapes. The more he looks the more he sees, skulls and antlers and porcupine quills and feathers. On the plates there's steak tartare, chicken liver pate, lamb chops with a cognac dijon cream sauce, crisp lemon calf liver, braised beef lungs, parmesan crumbled lamb brains, escargots a la bourguignonne, foie gras, pork belly with sugarcane skewers, osso buco, it all goes on and on.

He knows all this because he's eaten every single one of these meals in the last short while.

He stands still for a long while, his shoulders heavy, before finally looking at the bodies at each end of the table.

One of the bodies is hollowed out completely, his torso gaping. Will looks a bit lower and finds that all he is is a torso. No legs, and no arms. What little flesh is left seems to be pinned up to the chair. With a flash of nausea, he knows what ingredients were used for these meals.

The other body is in one piece aside from the endlessly dark holes where his eyes should be. The body stares blindly across the feast. The hands are posed palm up in offering or request, and when Will walks closer, he finds the eyeballs sewed into the skin. It's uncanny how well the eyes have been fit into this flesh, with skin stretched like eyelids.

Will stares for so long that the flowers wilt and the fruit rots and the skulls crack. The tentacle twitches and twists and flicks up its ends around the plates. Will watches the meat grow shiny and fresh, steaming into the air with the overwhelming smell of meat, before it all turns pink and bloody and covered in veins, raw. He turns his head away and sees the figure at the head of the table lift his hands to his face so his eyes line up normally. The eyeballs move in his palm and look straight at Will.

He feels poisoned. He feels compelled to eat more. He feels nauseous and out of it. He's felt out of it for weeks now, hasn't he? He's felt like the star of a play, following his script and pretending it's real. There's been a spell over his eyes, as though he walked into the witch's house and saw a beautiful cottage instead of the smoking oven he was going to step into. It had felt so comforting before.

He notices the curtains billowing slightly and realizes this side of the house hasn't had windows installed yet. He lifts the curtain out of the way, crawls out over the drywall, and leaves the house without anyone noticing him.

It's only when he's at home, sitting with his back against the leg of a chair, that he answers Jack's call. Lucky leans against his thigh and he tugs her close, an apology for kicking her this morning. Such a sweet, innocent puppy. She loved Hannibal.

Jack doesn't yell. It's a few long seconds of silence before he just says, "Well?"

"I got overwhelmed. I'm sorry. I left because I didn't want to embarrass myself," he says, surprised at how flat and emotionless his voice is.

"I hate this, Will. I really do, but you can't just leave like that."

"I know."

"Can you tell me anything?"

Will almost laughs, but the amusement leaves as fast as it came. He should have already called the police. Maybe it's because he knows Hannibal would leave no evidence, or maybe he doesn't quite believe it yet. Or maybe he just needs to understand what he's seeing first.

"All I can say is he wants someone to know who he is, see him for who he is. And he wants to consume them." He gulps and an entirely inappropriate flash of amusement rolls through him again. "Ah, yeah, and he's been eating his victims. All that food is going to be meat taken from his guest."

"He's a cannibal? And has been this entire time?"

“Yep,” Will says, knowing he’s still miles away from processing that fact himself.

He listens to rustling and sighing on the other end and can feel Jack’s restless anxiety through the phone.

“This feels closer, though, doesn’t it? If he’s letting us see him, too.”

“He’s shown enough. He’ll be caught if he wants to be.”

“What do you mean?” Jack asks.

“I mean it won’t be easy still.”

“We’re going to catch him, Will. Okay? Don’t get hung up on it, if he’s getting cocky… we can catch him.”

“I’ll think it over, uh, reconstruct his thinking, and then get back to you. Alright?”

“Will—wait. I usually wouldn’t do this, but I… maybe it would be better to hear this now.”

“Yeah?”

“Price and Zee did some looking around and we found evidence of Abigail being at each spot the girls were abducted. We have nearly enough evidence, so I’m going to put out a warrant for her arrest tomorrow and do a full-scale investigation. Maybe she got a taste for it. Maybe she was the copycat and kept killing.”

Will squeezes his eyes shut and speaks through his teeth. “No. She wasn’t.”

“I know you cared about her. I don’t expect you to be objective about this one so I won’t put you on it or ask for anything from you. All I ask is that you don’t blame me for needing to do my job.”

“I gotta go.”

He drops the phone feeling like he’s spent every last bit of his energy. He pets his dogs almost mournfully, giving them each attention like it could never be enough. He feels like he’s being melodramatic, but if any situation deserves it, he thinks it’s this one.

He kisses Lucky on the head. “Hey, girl, I’m sorry for earlier. You deserve better.” He ruffles up the fur on top of her head and her eyes droop nearly closed. She is too trusting.

The knowledge lays on him like an unwanted layer of skin. He doesn’t want to think about what he’s supposed to do now. He picks up his phone, and then pushes it away again, leaving it on the floor as he goes for a long dog walk, letting his memory carry him through the woods and back.

Sunset presses on him too early, and, lightheaded, he finally makes himself some food and coffee.

He puts *it* off and lives in the fairytale for a little longer.

In the evening, he fishes his phone out of the pile of dog beds he’s been laying on, nothing less than sick to his stomach when he calls Alana. He doesn’t know if it’s guilt or anything else. He hasn’t done anything to her. He just could have called to warn her earlier than this.

She doesn’t answer, though. He waits a couple minutes and tries again.

He doesn’t remember much of last night, which points his suspicion in a scary direction. The fact of the matter is, he doesn’t know if Hannibal managed to make him talk after Will was… incapacitated. If so, Alana is in danger. He can admit that much to himself.

He feeds his dogs extra, puts a gun under his waistband, and looks back at his little house one last time before driving away.

He knows what he needs to do.

Chapter 20

Chapter Summary

Will arrives at Hannibal's house with a plan.

Will lets himself into Hannibal’s home. Soft opera music plays through the house and something smells incredible.

He steps warily into the kitchen and finds Hannibal, apron on and smiling over the stove. Will stares at the meat in the pan.

“Hello, Will. I’m glad you made it.” Hannibal doesn’t betray any nerves in his expression, but he refuses to look Will in the eyes for the first time that Will can recall.

“I haven’t refused your dinner invitation for a long time,” Will says, staying where he is on the other side of the kitchen. Them not embracing in greeting is also uncharacteristic. It makes it all the more real. Had Hannibal acted like things were normal, Will fears he might have believed the lie for a little longer and blamed his own unstable brain, but he feels uncomfortably aware of how real this is.

“Why don’t you go wait in the dining room for me to serve dinner? It won’t be long now,” Hannibal says. His grin turns strangely menacing. “And then we will talk.”

Will nods once and walks out of the room. He glances at the dining room and then keeps walking, careful to step lightly until he gets to the basement door. It locks from the outside, he notes. Abigail would have needed someone to let her into the rest of the house if she had broken into the basement.

Will doesn’t need anyone to let him in. He taught himself how to pick locks from a young age at the public library, and then used the skill to steal food from middle-class families that he knew were on vacation.

He gets past the basement door and walks carefully down the stairs. He can't see a thing and has to shuffle his feet to make sure he doesn't fall.

He feels along the wall, listening to nothing but his own breathing until he finds the cool plastic of a light switch and flips it up. He can't be blind anymore. The lights buzz with power as the basement lights up section by section, spotlighting the medical bed at the end of the room for just a moment.

"Fuck," he breathes.

He follows his senses and turns around, not surprised to find Hannibal standing silently at the bottom of the stares, observing him. Will only returns his gaze for a moment, before looking back at the person on the bed.

"Is she still alive?" Will asks.

"She is. She will survive this, if we let her."

Will twitches at the *we* but just asks, "Why?"

"I never wanted Alana Bloom to be implicated in this, but she stepped in anyway. She wouldn't stay blind."

"Not like how I was blind."

"Oh, Will. I didn't want you to be blind."

Will steps forward and strokes the skin on Alana's forearm. Her modesty is preserved by some sheets and in between is a bandage around her torso. Kidney, that's what Will saw in

the pan upstairs.

He remembers waking up in his own hospital room to find her hand on his. It made him feel something, even if it never compared to how he felt about Hannibal.

“You didn’t want me blind, but you let it happen because you wanted time to change me to your needs.”

“Not to my needs. To that which you have hidden below, if you would just follow the urges you kept down for so long, and cultivate them as the inspirations they are…”

Will chuckles dryly, smoothing out the sheets next to Alana. Her vulnerability is striking.

“Yet you made yourself willingly blind from what I was already showing you,” Hannibal continues. “It made me wonder whether you were ready, but here you are. Should I be expecting Jack at my door, or is it only you?”

It’s at that moment that the door upstairs clicks open. Hannibal twitches and Will stares on, unsurprised.

Will did what he had to do.

He only notices the knife that Hannibal procures because it flashes in the light. Will stays quiet still, too curious about how Hannibal will react. Is freedom more important to him than Will?

The footsteps that go down the stairs are light and hesitant though, and Hannibal seems to recognize them. He reaches out a hand to help Abigail down the last couple of steps.

Hannibal doesn’t ask and Will doesn’t explain. The knife in Hannibal’s hand disappears into a sleeve.

Will knew he had to prioritize Abigail for once, after being so blind to the risk Hannibal posed to her. He went straight to Port Haven and signed her out, explaining the situation in the ride to Hannibal's. She did not blow up as he expected her to, putting her head in her hands and trembling in the passenger seat, but he thinks the explosion is coming now.

"Who—" Abigail starts, looking across the room. "Is *that*—"

Will feels the urge to protect Abigail, cover her eyes with his own hands as if she was a toddler exposed to an obscene movie, but he knows it's too late. She deserves to know.

"*Alana!*" Abigail shrieks, running over to the hospital bed. She looks like she's about to shake Alana awake, but thinks better of it when she sees the bandages and how fragile she is.

Hannibal walks behind her and tries to grab her elbow, but Abigail jerks away.

"Abigail," he says evenly.

"How could you? You *knew* how I felt about her!"

"She will be okay, in any manner."

"How is this okay!?"

"Abigail, let's go upstairs and have a conversation that is not amidst the smell of medical sterilization."

Abigail stares at him defiantly, and then runs toward the stairs. Will doesn't try to stop her, and when Hannibal meets eyes with him, confused and slightly alarmed, Will returns no sympathy.

Will follows Hannibal up the stairs slowly, mostly curious to see what havoc Abigail will wreak.

He makes it to the kitchen in time to see Abigail pick up the simmering kidney and throw it at the wall using the handle of the pan for leverage. The meat slaps against the wood panelling and then flops pathetically to the floor, while the rest of the sauces and oils stick and then slowly drip down, painting it in streaks. She throws the pan back on the stove with a clang and Hannibal stares open-mouthed at her.

“What, all she is is a fucking dinner? I won’t let you enjoy that. You and your fucking self-satisfaction!” she shouts.

She knows more than Will expected, Will realizes. She has for a long time, he garners. Alana was right that Abigail is scared of Hannibal. He’s far more like Garret Jacob Hobbs than any of them realized. Even as Hannibal takes a step forward, Abigail lurches away like a skittish woodland creature.

“Hannibal, stop,” Will commands.

Both Hannibal and Abigail halt and look at him. He can’t keep avoiding the inevitable, there’s already no coming back from the secrets he’s kept in his basement.

“A warrant is out for Abigail’s arrest, and this will be the next place they look for her. I’m going to get my things and then leave, and as soon as I’m on the road, I’m going to call an ambulance to come and get Alana,” Will says. He’s proud of how loud and steady he keeps his voice. He doesn’t want Hannibal to know about the vast amounts of uncertainty below.

Hannibal turns to look at him straight on. From the reaction, Will imagines Hannibal had some plan to cover his tracks with Alana. Now, Will is betraying him by asking him to expose himself to the FBI, and leave the persona he has been shielded in for his whole life.

“You would take away my freedom after all,” Hannibal says, glancing from Will to Abigail like the concept is incredulous.

“And that’s the most important thing to you? And me and Abigail are *what?* Toys you can wind up?”

Hannibal’s chin tilts and his whole expression changes. His friendly demeanor dissipates and what’s left looks ruthless and resentful, aghast and unforgiving that Will would doubt him and fail to understand this grand plan of his.

Seeing it, Will realizes how much Hannibal had been banking on Will understanding him through his empathy. *That’s* what made Will special, and what allowed him to capture Hannibal’s affections after years of being a bachelor to hide his darkest vocations. Nothing real.

Glaring down his nose at Will with betrayal in his eyes, Hannibal says, “That is what you think of me? So low and obtuse.”

Will steps closer so they meet face to face. “No, I think you want me to go along with your plan and your life because you think I will fit there better than elsewhere. Package me out a little place in the universe, spoonfeed me some flesh, and convince me to fulfill my darkest desires and all of the things in my nightmares? Willingly sit at the table with my friend on my plate? Did you expect me to sit and roll over?”

“I expect you to stop hiding behind niceties and recognize the potential you have squashed down for years out of fear,” Hannibal says.

“You ever think you made it all up in your head? Maybe you’re actually scared of being alone and hoping with all you got that I fit the bill for the fucked up fantasy you’ve thought up in your mind? You sorely overestimated what I will put up with.”

Hannibal’s lip snarls upward and his eyes moisten. “You *wanted* to see me. This is me showing you, and now you don’t want it?”

“I—” Will’s throat closes up at the sight of Hannibal’s hurt. He shakes his head and turns away.

“I’ll give you an option, okay?” Will says. “I’ll be leaving with Abigail, so long as she chooses to come and avoid her arrest. You have autonomy in your decision, whether you want to come with me and try to work something out or not. You can meet me at my house. It’s up to you now, Hannibal.” He turns and storms out to his car without waiting for a reply, every step outside of the house more difficult than the last.

He only sits for a minute in his dark car before Abigail climbs back into the passenger seat, which he isn’t too surprised about after her outburst at Hannibal, though he did wonder if she would just leave them both and run away on her own. He reckons she is still too scared to try and survive on her own. She is cunning, but she doesn’t have the experience or the resources to take care of herself.

Maybe, at least a small part of her, even wants Will to take care of her. He doesn’t know if that’s simply wish fulfillment on his part.

She stares out the side window, hiding her tear-streaked face from Will. He expected her to come, but he’s not entirely sure about Hannibal. He doesn’t know what he’ll do if Hannibal doesn’t come.

He also knows that if Hannibal refuses him, Will won’t be able to stay in Wolf Trap anyway. He won’t be able to lay his head where he began to imagine Hannibal being permanently. There were few things Will wouldn’t have done just to keep him around. Will had begun to imagine fixing up a new house together and going on romantic getaways and seeing Abigail grow older together and all of it is now shattering before him.

He looks in the rearview mirror, hoping against all rationality to see Hannibal sitting in his Bentley, waiting to go.

When he sees no one, he quickly pulls out of the spot and starts to drive away. Abigail turns around, staring at Hannibal’s townhouse until they’re out of view.

“What if he hurts her?” Abigail says.

Will pauses. *Then he will have betrayed us both,* Will wants to say. He wants to see what Hannibal will do, if he will dare to sacrifice his image for their complicated little found family. He might cover his tracks and it will be clear just how important his freedom and reputation are. It would be too easy for him to frame Will as the psychotic ex-lover with Will’s history.

Abigail doesn’t care about the symbolism of it. She cares if Alana is okay. Will doesn’t know what it says about him that he doesn’t care about that as much as he cares about knowing what Hannibal will do.

“He might be killing her right now,” Abigail says when he doesn’t reply, clearly distraught.

Will can’t deny that. “Or he might be packing his things,” Will says.

“You still want him to come?” Abigail asks, incredulous.

Will tightens his hands on the steering wheel and keeps his eyes on the road. He feels a lump forming in his throat. The right thing would be to promise to let Hannibal go now.

“You’re like him,” Abigail says. “I can’t believe you’re like him, too.” She puts her hands over her face.

“I’m not like him,” Will says and then pauses. “It’s more complicated than that.”

“We need to call the police so he doesn’t hurt her,” Abigail says firmly.

“I said when we’re on the road away from here. He might just be—”

“He might be killing her right now!”

Will sighs. He wants to give Hannibal a better chance than that. He *needs* to.

He couldn’t take his life, can Will even take his freedom?

“Let’s give him an hour, okay?”

“She could already be dead, and you don’t even care.”

“Listen, calling the police won’t stop Hannibal. Nothing will stop Hannibal.”

Abigail curls in on herself, hugging her arms across her chest.

“I still won’t let him hurt you,” Will says.

“Sure, like *you* can stop him.”

Will wants to be the one that can. He wants to be the one that convinces Hannibal to follow him, even if it means exposing his life. He wants to be enough, and he wants the confirmation that it wasn’t simply a game for Hannibal, but he’s not entirely sure about that.

He’s not even sure if he’d tell Hannibal to stop killing people. He’s not sure that he cares.

They sit in silence for the rest of the drive home, and all the while, Will looks in his rearview mirror, hoping against all odds to see a black Bentley catch up to him.

Chapter 21

Chapter Summary

Will and Abigail prepare to run away together.

Chapter Notes

I just got back from camping and am a bit behind on replying to comments, but I really appreciate all the feedback, you are all so great ❤️

As a little update, this story will end up being right around 100k words and posted without delay on the usual schedule (Sunday and Thursdays)! I do have some other ideas I want to post in the universe without making this fic too drawn out and chaotic so I'm going to make it a series if anyone wants to subscribe to that. 😊 Hopefully soon I will put out a little Abigail-POV oneshot set in earlier chapters (which believe it or not I actually wrote BEFORE this fic and then built around, but I have a million little plot things to fix lol) (Edit: finally posted that Abigail-POV oneshot here)

Enjoy! ❤️

Will jams his car full of belongings and supplies and dogs and ties even more things to the roof. He's sweating with the exertion of trying to fit it all.

He can't stop looking at the road leading up to his house, but it's empty as far as he can see, and once the car is packed, there is nothing else to wait for.

"It's been over an hour," Abigail says, defeated. She's been sitting on the grass, refusing to help, and holding Lucky in a hug. This is the last context he wanted them to meet in. They both look so small to Will right now.

Will stares helplessly at the road.

“Face it. He’s not coming back to you. He’d probably rather eat Alana than come and find you,” Abigail says.

Will doesn’t reward that comment with a response, having seen enough of her emotionally-driven cruelty by now, but it doesn’t stop it from hurting. He digs his phone out of his pocket, his hands shaking as he dials.

“I need to report a violent crime,” Will says. He tells the 911 operator Hannibal’s address, feeling numb as he recites what he knows he needs to say. For Abigail’s sake, at least. “Send an ambulance.”

Will hangs up in the middle of further questioning. If Will was being fair, he would report that Hannibal is the Chesapeake Ripper. He would call Jack and tell him what he knows, so that Jack can lead the manhunt. Jack would be the most competent officer to arrest Hannibal. Not to mention that Jack has always been the most desperate to catch him and would feel betrayed if Will hid it from him.

Will calls Hannibal, instead. He calls the landline, praying that no one will pick up. It would mean Hannibal might be on the road toward him and not cooking or killing.

“Hello,” comes Hannibal’s voice, casual and flat.

Will’s stomach sinks and he can’t bring himself to speak for a few long moments. Hannibal waits silently.

“They know,” Will chokes out.

Hannibal hangs up the phone on him.

Tears in his eyes, Will stares at his phone a minute longer, and then tosses it inside the open door of his house. To keep Abigail safe, he can’t have anything that can be tracked. It also means letting go of Hannibal’s only ability to contact him.

He slams the door, regretting it when he sees Abigail flinch.

He slouches his posture, trying to look less aggressive. “Sorry. Let’s get going. Take Lucky on your lap if you can. It will be a tight squeeze.”

She watches him for a long moment and Will wonders if she’ll deem him too insane and go off on her own.

Instead, she nods and gets in his car.

The cabin is not in his family’s name, which is why Will chooses it. His dad’s friend owns it, one whose alcoholism has probably progressed far enough that he won’t be traveling here for fishing anytime soon, assuming he’s even still alive. Will has been able to come here to fish before, and he can pretend the invitation is still standing if he needs.

Abigail looks unimpressed. Deep in the trees, it looks a bit like her father’s hunting cabin.

The dogs run side to side with their noses against the ground, quickly covering all of the property to the line of the trees. They line up excitedly at his legs while Will starts to pick the front door’s lock with the tools he brought, creaking the door open within a few minutes.

The place smells of dirt and mildew. Thankfully there are sheets draped across the soft furniture, but the counters and dressers are covered in a layer of dust, confirming just how abandoned this place is.

Will sighs. If he stops, he probably won’t get up again, and it will be hard to keep his mind off of Hannibal. As tired and sore as he is from the long drive, he gets to cleaning immediately, opening all of the windows to air the place out as he dusts and sweeps dirt right out the door in big clouds that make him cough.

Abigail stays near the car, staring at the ground with despair. They both got the short end of the stick with this mess, he thinks. He has no clue how he's going to cheer her up or give her hope for the future now. Most of his previous plans for her depended heavily on Hannibal's money and support.

He takes advantage of her refusal to enter the house and flips it inside out, filling garbage bags up with trash and stacking up well-preserved food on the table, all the while dusting and scrubbing and wiping the grime away. As the dogs track in more dirt running in and out he knows a truly clean cabin is too much to wish for, but he'll do his best for Abigail.

When the sun starts to go down he realizes that he needs to make food for the two of them and microwaveable dishes probably aren't going to cut it here with the limited power. After digging through his packed cooler, overwhelmed and emotionally crashing, he just brings out everything he can think of for sandwich ingredients.

"Abigail!" he calls out the door to where Abigail hasn't moved an inch. "I have some food for us. We'll figure out some meals in the coming days so right now we're going to have to make do with what we got. I'm no Hannibal, I know, but let me know if—"

Will freezes as she steps over the threshold into the cabin, arms wrapped around herself and shaking. "Hey, you're shivering like crazy, jeez why didn't you come in? Let me get the fire going, grab your food."

Abigail makes a plain sandwich and curls in on herself in one of the lawn chairs propped up by the kitchen while Will starts up the wood stove in the corner. What kind of a caregiver is he if he can't even keep her warm?

Will grabs his own food and then timidly pulls another chair close to Abigail and leans forward on his knees.

"I know I was lost in my own world here, but any reason you let yourself freeze outside like that?" Will asks.

She shakes her head, chewing slowly. She's still shivering slightly.

"It won't be like this forever, I promise," he continues. It's a promise to himself, too. He can't live like this, the burning panic at the tip of his tongue. He doesn't know if that will leave anytime soon.

"What else could it possibly be, other than just in jail?" she asks.

Will chews his own food, thinking it over.

"We play it by ear. Whether Hannibal goes to prison or gets away, things will be most intense at the start, but even for the worst serial killer present they can't have infinite resources for the manhunt. It's the same for missing persons, the first 48 hours are most important to check escape routes, or if they get him, make sure they have enough to hold him. We have the shitty position of being personally known by the head of the Bureau, and Jack will be wanting us found, and fast. If we let things settle down and off of the public's radar then we can get by much easier and figure out a plan."

"Ah, the elusive plan, which you clearly have no clue about."

Will shrugs, but can't hold back his wince. "I can make do just about anywhere, I've been moving and adjusting my entire life, doing odd jobs, and don't need much of anything anymore. It's you who has your whole life ahead of you. If you want to go to college or go somewhere you've always wanted to, we can, you know, within reason. I obviously can't, uh, provide as much as Hannibal could have." He puts his sandwich down, finding himself with little appetite. He stopped at the bank already to withdraw the savings he could, but it will drain fast on the road. "Maybe we can break back into his house and sell some of those old antiques," he jokes weakly.

"Hannibal wanted me to go to school in Florence," she says matter-of-factly.

"Of course he did."

“Sorry to tell you I don’t have any big dreams myself anymore. Hard to really care,” she says, standing abruptly and leaving her own barely-touched sandwich behind. “I’m going to bed. Where do I sleep?”

Will nods toward the bedroom. “I’ll take a chair.”

Abigail doesn’t even feign the courtesy of offering Will the bed. *Her* back wouldn’t feel broken from sleeping in a chair, but Will doesn’t think he could deny her whatever comforts he can offer right now anyway. Abigail leaves the room quickly and the dogs all follow her movement curiously.

Will tears up the rest of Abigail’s sandwich and his own and tosses it between his dogs. It can be his apology for the change of scenery and company.

The food isn’t what Will needs anyway. He finds whiskey and takes a sip right out of the bottle before getting a glass. *This* is what he needs. Desperately.

He slouches down and mopes. He thinks somewhere deep down he at least expected something more… final when it all came to head. Perhaps the clearest image of the monster so far and the slice of a blade across his torso.

This is almost mundane. As if Hannibal betrayed him in some normal kind of way, leaving Will alone and heartbroken and bitter just like most people experience at some point in their lives. Unfulfilled separation and drowning his sorrows. As if Hannibal just cheated on him, or something.

Although if he found out Hannibal was cheating on him, it might have been Will’s turn to be the monster.

He knocks back the rest of his glass. He still wants him so *badly.* That urge is supposed to go away when you see someone’s real face.

Alana would tell him something about seeking closure for himself, separate from Hannibal's influence. Underneath it would be that subtle hint of *I told you so.*

Well, she would tell him that if she wasn't probably dead in Hannibal's basement right now.

Maybe he should feel embarrassed for not seeing it earlier, but it's not like he was *trying* to see it. He promised to step back from the murder around him and well, he accomplished that. It feels only right that it followed him after all, burrowed in as close as it possibly could.

He spoke to Hannibal before about how it felt good to do bad things to bad people. Would it feel good to do bad things to Hannibal now?

He imagines it now. A gun, a knife, his fists, his hands, palms pressing against his throat, choking him, taunting him, saying *count to a hundred for me.*

Slit throat, blood pouring over his face, mouth open and taking it, drowning on the hot liquid, *because you always liked to choke me, didn't you?*

Yes, he thinks, it would feel good to do bad things to Hannibal. It just wouldn't feel good to see it *end.*

He gets through two more glasses of feeling sorry for himself, slouched in the chair and mouth twitching with fought-off tears, before Abigail starts screaming.

He's up in a flash, knocking his new glass over in the process, and hurries into the room. The dogs all spook, barking and pushing themselves up with nails scratching over wood floors.

He recognizes this kind of scream, he's pretty sure. This has been him many times, screaming in his own sweaty bed, mostly *before* dating Hannibal, when nothing artificial clouded his brain.

“Abigail, hey, Abigail,” he pats over the blanket a few times, and when she wakes, she jolts completely upright with a wheezing gasp.

“You’re alright, Abigail, you’re safe here,” he reassures, keeping his hands to himself in case it would make her uncomfortable. God, Hannibal would be better at this.

She breathes in a few deep gasps and then nods, frowning at the bedsheets below her.

“What did you see?” he asks, unable to help himself.

Her hands go to her own neck, stroking a timid finger along the scar brandishing her left side, as if to make sure it’s still there. To make sure it’s not open and gushing. Will nods in understanding. He doesn’t imagine it was Garret Jacob Hobbs in this dream.

“I’ll do everything I can to protect you, not that I’m not aware of my own fallacies, especially when it comes to him. Somehow I still don’t think he’d hurt us,” Will says.

She sits up and curls her knees to her chest. She scoots to the other side of the bed and Will hesitates at the silent invitation, but crawls in to sit next to her, stiff against the headboard.

They are quiet for a few minutes, Will unwilling to disrupt the peaceful solidarity of their heartbreak.

“Do you still want him to come?” Abigail asks, just as she did earlier, but with the ice and judgment gone from her voice.

He nods mournfully. “The heart is not so intelligent.”

“I still feel like I want to trust him, but that’s insane, isn’t it? He might have killed more people than my dad, even.”

“He killed many more than your dad,” Will says.

“So he—” Abigail stutters for a moment and then breathes in deeply. “He is a serial killer, no coming back from that. I’m not crazy. And he… eats people, just like my dad.”

Will nods. He doesn’t like hearing it put in such plain words. It doesn’t seem to capture what Hannibal does.

“I don’t understand. Either of them, or you, any of it!”

Will grins bitterly at the dark room in front of them. Sparse, old furniture and moth-eaten blinds that show bits of the moon beyond. “I think you do understand a bit too well, Abigail, but I understand that it is hard to put into words.”

“Not as well as you do,” she says, but then pauses and seems to rethink. “You told me killing someone was the ugliest thing in the world.”

“One of them,” Will mutters, less confident in that declaration now. It might be beautiful in comparison to what is killed. Sometimes.

“I thought there was something wrong with me because I didn’t feel ugly killing Nick Boyle. I felt good. That’s why it was so easy to lie about it.”

“Like you didn’t really do anything wrong?”

“Feel like you’d done something wrong when you killed my dad?”

“I felt terrified. And then, well, I felt powerful.”

Abigail nods in understanding. “It felt good. To get to end it, to stop it all. I wish I—I wish I killed my dad, too. For killing my mom, for killing those girls, for making *me—”*

She cuts herself off.

“For making you the lure?” he asks. He doesn’t know if it’s the whiskey that makes him feel so accepting of it now, but he doesn’t feel like he has the right to hold anything against Abigail.

“He would have killed me if I didn't do it!”

“You did what you had to do. You killed parts of yourself through it.”

“I never wanted to do it. I never wanted to understand it.”

“I know.”

“What exactly does *he* do? Did you know?”

“On some level, yes. He’s…” Will clears his throat. “He is the Chesapeake Ripper and who knows what else, and thinking now, in all likelihood he’s the Copycat and the one who called your house that day, but you knew that already, didn’t you?”

She looks away.

Will continues on. “I know the Chesapeake Ripper and I know Hannibal, and the two images have formed in my mind as the story I know to be true with almost all of the pieces together. It’s more that he cares for elegance over suffering, beauty over banality, uniqueness over commonality. A great deal of the world disappoints him because he cannot stand rudeness

and his tastes are precise, making the vast majority of people no better than pigs. He likes us, though. He finds us interesting, at least as interesting as a new toy set is, like one of those massive lego sets that you can build up into a piece of art and then it's done, and you can put it on a shelf in its perfect form or you can break it apart and build up the pieces into something else. He's the kind of person to break it apart over and over to keep it interesting, no matter if you ruin it beyond repair. He's too careless, though, and he's *wrong* for it. He doesn't realize how precious it is that we're so similar to him, that we can actually understand and accept him. I truly don't think he was trying to hurt us with Alana, I think he just doesn't know what to do now that he's found us. It's new for him, it's new how we have changed him. Like a cat giving its owners a dead, rotting rat to show its love when it's too skittish to show affection."

"I didn't even *know.* This is so fucked up. She didn't deserve it," Abigail says quietly.

"It isn't about deserving. She stepped too close to his world."

She hugs her arms around her chest. "I need to know if she's okay."

"Okay, well, I'll go to a library tomorrow and check out the news stories. I imagine it's broken by now, but if not, I'll call Jack. That sound good?"

She nods. "Okay."

The silence drags on for a few more minutes, not particularly comfortable but still more intimate and understanding than they've ever been before.

"Do you love him?" she asks.

Will squeezes his eyes shut. They haven't said it before, and yet now that she's said it... "Uh, that's probably what this feeling is, yeah. I am almost certain."

"Still?"

“That feeling’s not going anywhere very fast, if ever. I didn’t seem to have much choice in the matter.”

“He’s charming,” Abigail mutters.

“So charming.” Will groans and rubs his face with both hands.

He hears the gentle twinkle of her giggling next to him. He peeks between his fingers and a smile spreads on his face at her sudden joy, even if it’s amusement at Will’s despair. He will take it.

He drops his hands and chuckles. “What has he gotten us into?”

Her smile drops a bit, but he can tell she’s calmer than before.

After a few minutes of sitting in silence, Abigail sinks down further into bed and curls up with her arms over her chest. It makes her look shockingly young. She is, he supposes. He’s used to her using her youth as manipulation and pretending to be older than she is otherwise, but what is the truth? She has had half of her nurturing affection growing up replaced with violence and then went through trauma that most fully grown adults could not even fathom. He imagines she is forever stuck in those lost parts of her youth but forced to be mature and intuitive beyond her years for her own protection.

He wants to protect her. If he could grow old and see her come home—to a home he’s made—smiling and free, then it might all feel worth it.

Will hesitantly lays down on the pillow next to her. Abigail turns the other way but doesn’t tell him to leave. He turns his back to her too and lets himself drift off, whiskey-blurry mind filled with thoughts of how things might be in the future. This new, uncertain future he has to get used to now.

It’s a restless sleep, barely even sleep at all, but at least he had her slight acceptance to give him peace.

Chapter 22

Chapter Summary

Will searches for updates about what happened to Hannibal after they left.

Will and Abigail don't speak in the morning. They rise separately and patter around, awkward getting ready in the unfamiliar place and with each other's unfamiliar company, but eventually they meet in the kitchen in harmony for some cereal that Will packed. He counts the items in his cooler, thinking about what he should stock up on when he goes out today. He writes an itinerary in his head. It will be good to stay busy.

He clears his throat. "Most of the dogs are perfectly trained off-leash and won't go too far. If you can, try to keep Winston and Lucky tied up when outside, somewhere with shade and water. I'll find some longer rope for you. Winston has a habit of trying to look for me when I'm gone for too long and I'm worried he just might make the trek back to Wolf Trap to search. He's too loyal for his own good. Lucky is just a bit wayward and I worry she'll run off and get lost without me."

Abigail nods in understanding. "How long will you be gone?"

"Not long. I need to go to a further town to make sure they can't track us here, and then I'll come straight home with updates and food. Anything you want?"

"Good news about Alana and poptarts," she says with a grin.

He laughs. "I'll do my best."

He talks to Abigail a bit more about the dogs and their feeding patterns. She turns more melancholy and reserved, but promises to care for them and not wander too far.

He gives his dogs some last attention and time together outside, breathing in the fresh air on the porch as they sniff the surrounding ground, and then he leaves.

He travels three towns away, not sure what scale the manhunt for him and Abigail will be yet. It hasn't been 48 hours yet, but they are certainly on Jack's personal radar and he'd like to keep the cabin they're at safe from any search boundaries.

He finds a computer at a public library that won't be in most people's line of sight. Though he hates to do it, he wants this trip to be efficient, so he navigates directly to tattlecrime.com.

Nothing. He scrolls up and down the page twice over, double checking timestamps and even refreshes the page for good measure. He navigates to google and searches in some vague keywords, filtering for the date, but to no avail. He taps his fingertips on the linoleum desk, considering his options.

He asks to use the phone at the front desk and thankfully the librarian walks away to give him privacy. It will be traceable, but it will be anywhere else too. At least he can get a quick heads up and get going with his semi-kidnapped surrogate daughter, eight dogs, and cooler of food if he needs to.

Jack answers on the third ring.

"Jack? It's me."

"Will? Jesus, where the hell are you? We've been trying to get in contact with you all night."

"What's going on over there?"

"I'd rather you tell me. I'll only ask this once as your friend and not as an agent: do you know where Abigail and Alana are?"

Will holds back a groan. *Alana.* Hannibal covered it up.

“Will?”

“This is going to take a bit more explaining to do,” Will says.

“Will it? I don’t want to believe it, but you’re the one that called an ambulance for her and then she was nowhere to be found. What exactly happened that made you call? I won’t lie, those things you said to Hannibal before don't paint you in the best light right now.”

“Excuse me?”

“If you are thinking rationally, it will be better to turn yourself in now and get you into a hospital before you try anything bad again.”

“What are you talking about, Jack?”

“Do you recall telling Hannibal that you thought you were relapsing again? You’ve been out of it the last times I’ve seen you. This disease, it can progress fast, can’t it? Listen, Hannibal is worried sick right now, and he’s been defending you ever since we got the call that Abigail was checked out, but even he can see that something is up with you.”

“The *bastard,”* Will mutters under his breath, letting his head fall back. He must be planting the pieces to lead Will to taking the fall for everything, which is lower than Will expected, even for Hannibal. “I don’t have encephalitis again. Believe it or not, I’m thinking more clearly than I ever have before.”

“Tell me where you are then.”

“I left for my own protection. It’s *him,* and it’s always been him. I should have told you before, but I wasn’t clouded by sickness this time, I was clouded by my own damn emotions

and some drugs I didn't know were being given to me. That tableau? All meals that Hannibal has made for me in the past while, exactly how he made them, stitched eyes in the corpse because he wanted me to *see.* He left me a letter too, Jack, on my side table, if he hasn't gone to clear that evidence. It's vague and couched in plausible deniability but that's how he *is*."

"What are you saying?"

"He's the Chesapeake Ripper, the Copycat, too. He called the Hobbs' house that day, who else could it have been? He was there, we were taking files and he—he must have gotten a moment. The Copycat following me, all of his interest in me, it's because Hannibal likes to play with the FBI, and especially play with me, but he's done it to you too. Think about it, Jack, he fits the profile we've always had, the surgical experience, he has *no* discernable motive—"

Jack cuts him off. "It took you all this time to tell me this?"

"I loved him, Jack. Well, love. I wanted to go with him."

"Jesus, Will. What do you expect me to say to that? How am I supposed to corroborate any of this? You've distanced yourself and now run off completely, and you *still* haven't told me what you know about Abigail, right when we were going to arrest her. Now with Alana nowhere to be found, the one person that wanted that girl to stay where she was. Doesn't sound great to anyone, does it?"

He lowers his voice, putting a hand over the microphone and looking around for anyone listening. "Hannibal hurt Alana, and if you find her again, she'll be *down a kidney."*

"Christ, Will—"

"You need to stay open and listen to me, because it won't be easy to catch him. He leaves no evidence, but it just might be the best time to catch him because he's going to be vulnerable now. I fought back and now he's pinning it on me. He's smart but he's also emotional and rash."

Jack is silent for a few moments. “You’re not lying to me here?”

“I swear on my life, I’ve never been more confident about something. I finally see him for who he is.”

“I’m going over there for dinner tonight. He invited me over to talk. I’ll keep my eyes and ears open, but in return, I need you to come back.”

“I will, I’m coming ASAP.”

“You are?” He sounds surprised that Will is giving in.

“I gotta go now, be careful there.”

He hangs up before Jack can question him more, thanks the librarian, and leaves the library in a jog.

No matter what happens, he can’t take back that he just told Jack the truth. Hannibal decided to cover up his own crime and Will took it away from him. But Hannibal tried to pin it on *him* so he doesn’t think he’s too far out of line.

He has a decision to make, now, whether he wants to catch Hannibal like he’s wanted to catch the Ripper for ages now, forgive him his sins and make something work between them all like a dysfunctional little family on the run, or deal with him the way that feels good: doing bad things right back to him.

Will moves fast, grabbing food and disposable phones from a gas station and racing back home to Abigail. Already this driving time is putting him behind schedule, but he can’t leave her high and dry.

She stands up when he gets back, staring at him expectantly with wide, blue eyes and he tosses the disposable phone into her hands.

“Hannibal covered it up and no one knows where Alana is. He’s trying to blame it on me instead, but I told Jack the truth. I’m going to get back there now before it gets messy, but I want you to stay here because I don’t really know what he’ll do. Will you be okay, even if I end up being gone for a few days?”

Solemnly she nods. “Try to find Alana?”

“I’ll do my best.”

He tucks in closer for an awkward hug, rubbing her back.

“And I’ll try to do what’s best, whatever that is. It’s all I can promise. Take care of my dogs for me?”

He pets his dogs on his way out, trying to ignore the needy eyes from Lucky, but tears himself away so he can get back on the road. At this rate, he should be able to make it to Baltimore just in time for dinner. The last thing he makes sure to grab is his gun.

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It’s pouring rain by the time he makes it to Baltimore, obscuring the road ahead of him into a blur.

After so much driving his eyes start to play tricks on him, like he’s driving straight into a deep ocean. He’s worried he’s going to drown if he doesn’t crawl out the door. He sets the windshield wipers as fast as they can go and the movement keeps him awake until he pulls up to badly street-park outside of Hannibal’s house in the dark of the evening.

He ducks down into his jacket and runs to the front door. He raps on the wood with his fist and then lets himself right in.

He pats the hard lump of the gun down the back of his pants for good measure and walks carefully toward the kitchen. It would always be the kitchen.

The house is eerily quiet, even with the rain knocking on the windows and the oven fan rattling in the wind. As discordant as the house could feel at times, it became a source of comfort with Hannibal's presence. Now he doesn't know if he can trust his eyes to tell him what's a booby trap and what's safe. What could be hiding in the shadows?

His instincts tell him nothing. He's almost certain that he would *feel* Hannibal's presence if he were here lurking, waiting.

As he steps further down the hallway, the only sign of movement he sees is the unmistakable pool of blood seeping out under the pantry door.

After a compulsory check of the kitchen, shattered and messy with evidence of a fight, he opens the door. Inside is just who he expected: Jack Crawford sprawled against the wine rack, bleeding out of the side of his neck.

Peculiarly, Jack is staring straight up at the ceiling, as if looking for heaven through the wood panels of Hannibal's pantry. His right hand has pulled his tie tight around a glass shard protruding out of his neck, still bleeding profusely, while his left hand loosely holds his cellphone with Bella's name on the call. His eyes are distant but he's undoubtedly still bleeding.

"Jack, hey, I'm here," Will says, kneeling in the pool of blood beside him and pulling off his own jacket. He tucks it around Jack's neck for a better barrier and Jack finally registers his existence and turns his eyes to Will. He isn't sure that Jack really believes Will is here right now.

"Where is he?" Will asks.

All that comes out of Jack's mouth is a choking groan so Will leans in closer, turning his head.

"He… left."

"I'm going to call for help and then try to find him, okay?" There's little he can do here for Jack anyway. If Hannibal is really worried about his freedom then he might try to skip town immediately.

He moves to leave but Jack reaches out and grabs his arm.

"I got here and I just knew," he wheezes out. "I saw him. I saw—"

"The monster," Will finishes.

Jack nods slightly, wincing at the movement.

"Get him, Will."

Will pushes himself off the floor and hurries to the landline in the kitchen. He calls for an ambulance to Hannibal's address and then wastes no time in leaving the house, leaving Jack bleeding on the floor for getting too close to the monster too.

He should have known that Jack wouldn't take time to prepare. He would be impatient, desperate, and show up looking for that confrontation. Maybe Will did know when he told him. It isn't much of a surprise to find him like it.

He gets in his car and pulls out into the wet pavement, driving in one direction before he even considers where he's going.

Maybe he does know where to go.

He has a bad feeling about this. A proponent of solitude he might be, but if Hannibal is any bit as heartbroken as Will right now, he will want some other companionship after having a piece of it with Will. All Will has to do is think of the place he'd least like Hannibal to be and it feels far too likely.

He speeds to Bedelia's house and hurries out of the car again. Without a coat, the rain quickly soaks through his button-up and plasters his hair to his head.

His hunch is strong enough that he bypasses knocking and checks to see if the door is unlocked. When no alarm goes off, he only grows more confident that Hannibal was the one that bypassed the alarm system in the first place.

Of course. The weird reactions and strange comments. She knows who Hannibal is too. He's let someone else see him, even if just a little bit, and that is all he needs right now. Someone who will see and maybe even accept him.

Will slips off his shoes so he can walk silently across the wood floors, checking for life in each room before making his way up the stairs. He pulls the gun out of his pants and holds it down the line of his sight until he sees the open door with warm light streaming out. He picks up the pace.

What he walks in on still has him taken aback. Bedelia sits on her bed, wine glass in one hand and gun in the other, seemingly as casual as ever if it wasn't for the tears shining her eyes. She looks only slightly surprised to see Will here. The gun is pointed toward Hannibal, only a few feet away, wet and naked as the day he was born.

A folded up towel held between his hips just barely preserves his modesty, but he's clearly not trying too hard. Will points his gun at him too, cornering him into the room.

He doesn't seem particularly surprised to see Will. He turns toward the bedroom door and looks Will up and down before directing a similarly accusatory gaze as the other day onto Will.

"Jack sends his regards," Will says.

"Given sight and direction by you to enter this demise."

"You didn't finish him off," Will raises one eyebrow in a question.

Hannibal's lips stretch into a small smile. "In truth, I am not sure if it is Uncle Jack's time yet. I continue to consider him something of a friend."

"And is it Alana's time?"

"That also remains to be seen. There are a number of factors at play here."

Will gestures his gun at Bedelia.

"Is she a factor now?"

"She is a support and a buffer for my mind."

"Your paddle?" Will spits.

Hannibal just stares at him. Will turns to face Bedelia, not so subtly turning the gun with his gaze.

“Did you know?” Will demands. He jerks his head at Hannibal. “What he is?”

She speaks slowly, staring into her wine glass. “I knew of his persuasion, only steps away from coercion. I knew of the mask he wore, precisely represented to make him resemble a person and not what he really is. I knew that he wanted me to kill my patient and that was likely only the start.”

She speaks almost mournfully, but Will can see the act that it is. She’s just as manipulative as he is. Will burns red hot at her words. Has she wanted to see Hannibal? Why else would she stay around him?

Bedelia continues on. “Perhaps if you had asked me I would have warned you, but your ignorance kept you in a bubble, and I had to worry about my own self-preservation. I knew it was only a matter of time before you realized. Like Bluebeard’s final wife, bound to find the secrets hidden away in the basement.”

It stings, thinking of Alana cut open and stowed away in his basement. Something else makes his blood boil, though, something he hadn’t really thought about before.

“Final one, huh?” He looks at Hannibal. “Just how many have there been before me that you let you see you? Patients? Colleagues?”

“None,” Hannibal says simply.

Will steps closer, shaking the gun at Hannibal’s face. “*Don’t* lie to me.”

Hannibal turns his face away, refusing to look down the barrel at Will. It is uncharacteristically vulnerable—or maybe just more manipulative.

“I have persuaded individuals down the unconventional paths that I have seen fit for them. I have not let any individuals see me in authenticity, not as I have tried to show you,” Hannibal says.

Will glances at Bedelia to see if there's some shred of truth in that. Her expression is still inscrutable, but Will does feel like no one else could understand Hannibal like he does.

Will glares at him. "I have to deal with you, and my feelings about you."

"And how do you plan to do that? Will you choose a simple gun to erase the obstacles out of your life?" Hannibal asks. Will senses his disappointment. It's condescending.

"Come with me. Don't be a coward and leave it all behind. Come face this head on with me." *Away from her.*

He thinks he notices Hannibal soften slightly at that, but the smugness returns so fast that Will isn't sure if he imagined it. Hannibal glances between the two of them and at the guns trained on him in an almost casual way. "May I at least get dressed first?"

"Don't be smart," Will chirps. "Put on your fucking clothes."

Hannibal gets changed right where he is, unbothered by their gazes. Will has half a mind to shoot him anyway, his limbs trembling with the frustration of it all.

And then there's Hannibal's body before him, lean and strong and well-nourished, all of which Will has touched reverently and desperately. The first man he's ever allowed himself to have and the only one he'll ever want. He hates that he's reminded of his attraction to Hannibal, how it pulses day in and day out with undeniable chemistry. They aren't in a place to be how they were before.

Will glares at Bedelia across the room, slowly turning his gun on her instead. He watches for her eyes slipping downward, like he knows they probably have already. He still doesn't quite understand how intimate their relationship is, but he doesn't like it. He doesn't like *any* of this, especially not the confirmed hunch he has that Hannibal nearly left with her. She's nothing but a shameful replacement, and if Hannibal sees an intriguing mystery below her shallow mask then he's a fool.

“Thank you for letting me use your shower,” Hannibal says with faux politeness. He’s oozing more bitterness than Will has ever seen before. “It seems my plans have changed, but perhaps I will see you down the road soon.”

Will puts his arm out and waits for Hannibal to leave first.

He walks at his heel and things turn quiet until they are outside and quickly approaching Will’s vehicle to get out of the rain.

Hannibal stops him with a hand on his arm and Will jolts at the contact, so warm in comparison to the drenching rain.

“You’re exhausted, let me drive.”

Will doesn’t have it in him to fight that, and allows Hannibal to open the passenger door for him. Inside, the shivers really start and he’s grateful for Hannibal turning the car on and blasting the heat.

“So, Alana…” Will says.

“Yes?”

“She is alive. For how much longer?”

“Life support equipment has come a long way.”

Will nods in understanding. “That won’t keep forever without maintenance, though.”

“No. It will not.”

Hannibal meets Will’s eye contact and holds it in a display of power. Will doesn’t want to beg for her, he wants Hannibal to *understand,* but Hannibal clearly doesn’t want to give in. Will looks away. There is time.

“Are we going to see Abigail?” Hannibal asks, pulling back the gear shift.

“No.” Will looks out the passenger window. “I don’t care where we go. Just take us somewhere.”

“I know just the place.”

Hannibal pulls out and Will sinks back into the seat and, impossibly, tries to warm up from this flood.

Chapter 23

Chapter Summary

Hannibal and Will go somewhere to have a talk.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Will sleeps for the vast majority of the car ride, waking up to find his neck cricked to the side and not turning.

He winces and grabs the back of his neck, peeling himself off of the cold window. He jumps when Hannibal touches his shoulder sympathetically.

“We’re almost there,” he says, dropping his hand. Will stays tense, rubbing the top of his shoulders soothingly as he straightens himself against the car seat.

“Almost where?”

“Our weekend getaway location,” Hannibal says, almost cheerily.

Will scoffs, recalling the plans that fell through before they could begin. “Romantic.”

He’s surprised to find that it’s not even midnight. It’s only been a few hours since they left Baltimore even though it feels like forever. It *looks* like they’ve traveled to some other world entirely.

They’re driving down a gravel road between lush woodland, but Will can see little beyond that in the dark of night. It’s raining but not as much as before, just a light dotting that races

down the windowpane. The headlights guide their twisting path that seems to grow narrower and more isolated from society the further they go.

He's arrived at the terror of this fairytale. It's like he's walking deeper and deeper into the forest, unaware that the branches are actually sharp hands reaching out to him and the tree trunks are carved with eyes that watch his every move. He travels deeper and deeper, spurred on by the promise of adventure and mystery and perhaps a better life somewhere hidden, until the path behind him disappears completely.

For a moment he sees another figure made up of the shadows in the trees, that of a grand stag with gleaming feathers and glowing eyes. They have driven on before he can confirm whether it is a trick of the light or not and it hurts too much to look backward to check.

He blinks back into focus. He's not in a fairytale and there are no magical stags to follow. If anything, he's in a slasher film with his serial killer boyfriend taking him to an isolated spot in the woods.

"Where exactly is this getaway?"

"We are approaching a property I bought in Monongahela National Forest," Hannibal explains.

"You know, when most normal people want to go for a weekend getaway they just rent a cabin or pitch a tent."

Hannibal smiles deviously.

"You want more privacy than that. I see," Will mutters, slouching back in his seat. His neck is starting to gain movement again with his self-massaging.

They pull up to an unsurprisingly massive cabin, wooden and rustic but still modern-looking with tall windows out upon the porch that make it look as grand as a mansion.

Will is wobbly getting out of the car. Maybe it's because of how untethered his life has become. In another universe, he would have stepped up to this property swooning at the gift with Hannibal, his normal partner, in hand. Now he feels not unlike a hostage. But he is here of his own volition, so that must just make him an idiot.

He can hear water running somewhere but it's too dark to see much of anything when Hannibal turns off the headlights. There's no trace of light out this way, and not even a moon peeking out of the rain clouds to guide their way.

"Come, I have some fresh clothes for you in our bedroom," Hannibal says.

Will stiffens at the hand on his back up to the front door, but he goes where Hannibal leads him to, trying not to look too closely at the cozy furniture and fully stocked kitchen along the way. Hannibal takes their coats and flicks on the lights as they go. The dim yellow lighting feels blinding.

The master bedroom has a king bed that looks just as comfy as Hannibal's. The room has its own balcony off to the side with some chairs looking out through the woods. Hannibal goes straight to the walk-in closet and spreads apart some hangers to showcase a navy and orange flannel shirt among other plaid shirts and sweaters that look to be Will's style, if a bit better quality.

Despite the grandness of this place, almost everything is to Will's style. He feels an indescribable emotion crawl up his throat and can only nod at the clothes Hannibal has picked out for him.

Hannibal drops the soft fabric into his hands and Will stands still as Hannibal tugs off his own clothes and pulls on a gray sweater. He supposes Hannibal still expects Will to change in front of him, the easy intimacy that comes from being lovers. Nothing feels very easy for Will right now.

Hannibal straightens his clothes in the mirror and fixes his hair despite already looking as perfect as he always does. He turns to Will.

“I will put on tea. When was the last time you ate?”

Will stares at him blankly and Hannibal observes him.

“I will make us food as well.”

When Hannibal leaves the room and the footsteps fade enough, Will digs out his disposable cell phone and calls Abigail.

“Hello?” It sounds like he woke her up, judging by her raspy voice.

“Hi, Abigail, how are you doing?” he asks softly.

She makes a noncommittal noise, something like *meh.*

“Alana is alive, though I don’t have her location secured yet. I’m with Hannibal now and I will sort things out, one way or another. I’m not sure when I’ll be back, will you be okay taking care of yourself?”

“I can keep myself and your dogs alive, don’t worry. It’s kind of nice to be actually alone for once. Please find her.”

“Well, I’m glad to hear it. You can call me here if you ever need to but if there’s nothing imminent, I’d rather you wait until I call just so I can ensure I have privacy from him. I’ll call you later, okay?”

“Okay.” She yawns into the phone. “Goodnight.”

“Take care, Abigail.”

He hangs up and quickly gets dressed, trying not to think about how soft and warm the new clothes are. The closet is full of things that look to be his size. It’s excessive and would be annoying if he didn’t have a better grasp on who Hannibal is now. A clutch for control, panic beneath the indulgence.

He takes a seat on a couch in the living room by a tall window, sitting sideways so he can watch the rain streaming down. It’s a relatively modest living room, with enough book shelves and decorations that he feels crammed into the little corner, and lit only by the hallway light right now. He thinks he sees a flash of lightning in the distance, there and then gone.

Hannibal sits at his backside, setting their tea down on the coffee table. His hands go to Will’s neck next, rubbing circles into his muscles where he was hurting. Will can’t help but lean into it and Hannibal scoots up close with his chest against Will’s back and presses a kiss to the side of his neck.

“Some people would assume that finding out their partner is a murderer who attacked their friends automatically constitutes a breakup,” Will says, unwillingly stretching his neck back for Hannibal to dot more tender kisses.

“We’re not just some people,” Hannibal says into Will’s ear and then breathes in his scent.

Will grabs his hand to clutch over his shoulder and squeezes his eyes shut.

“I was happy when we were just some people,” he says.

“We never really were though, were we?”

“It was good to pretend.” Will chuckles weakly and squeezes his eyes shut.

Hannibal kisses his ear. “You have been pretending all your life in one way or another, getting so close to what you knew you couldn’t have. You wish to blame me for exposing this outlook and pulling you inextricably closer to the darkness, but you were just as drawn to me as I was to you, begging for me to show you the truth. And yet you came around and told me you didn’t want it anymore.”

“Is that what you thought? That I didn’t want it?”

“You tried to take my freedom. You were going to tell the world our secret.”

“I was going to save Alana and *leave.* Not even for myself, but for Abigail! As if you didn’t know how attached she was to Alana. You know, you could learn a thing or two about sacrifices for the ones you love.”

Hannibal is quiet behind him and Will likes to think it’s out of shame.

“If we’re talking about our grievances now,” Will continues, “not only did you not follow me when I offered you that chance, but then you tried to pin it all on me. You told Jack damning stuff that you *knew* wasn't true.”

Hannibal stays quiet and Will turns halfway back to say, “Well?”

“I have had the pieces in a place for a while now, for my own insurance. My intent was not malicious. On the contrary, I thought if I could have you somewhere I could always find you, it would give you more time to come into yourself the way I knew you could. I would have been in control and let you free when the time was right.”

A place that Hannibal could always find him and free him when he wanted to—Hannibal considered institutionalizing him. In the worst place Will could be.

“Have you ever thought that maybe the control was the problem?” Will asks, shaking his head in disbelief.

He imagines sitting in a cold jail cell, entirely of Hannibal’s doing. He imagines the hard mattress and security guards, not a single window to the outside world nearby. He imagines Hannibal, as self-satisfied as ever, stepping up to the bars to persuade Will to listen to him. Throwing jabs and taunts at him like a problem child left unattended at the zoo to fling rocks at the apes. Would Will break? He thinks he’d sooner choke Hannibal through the bars.

Hannibal sighs against him, turning his head to lean his cheek against Will’s hair. “What you offered to me, that beautiful potential, was a dream. If only you would look up and give it to me.”

“You still want it?”

“I do.”

Will pulls out of his grasp and turns around to sit face to face. Their legs knock together in the middle of the couch.

“There’s one thing you can do. One thing I need from you if I’m even going to think about going forward with any of this.”

“What would that be?”

Will smiles bittersweetly at the memories they have together and raises his eyebrows. “Tell me something vulnerable.”

Hannibal stills, staring out the window and into the distance at, what Will imagines, are all the unspoken stories that truly encapsulate such a man like Hannibal. He knows that Will won’t accept *just enough*. Not anymore. Will wants to see him let go of his mask completely.

Hannibal is so still that Will wonders if he might have shut down completely, but then he stands up.

“Let us eat first. A conversation such as that is no good on an empty stomach.”

Will frowns at the avoidance but decides he can be patient for now. He grabs his tea and then follows Hannibal to the kitchen and sits at the small wooden table to wait for him to finish up what’s cooking on the stove. Hannibal eventually serves him a relatively simple bowl of mushroom soup with some herbs dotting the top.

Will twirls his spoon through the thick liquid. “And these are normal mushrooms? No other *questionable* additives right?”

“It is normal mushroom soup.”

“Has there ever been a time that you weren’t drugging me in some way?”

Hannibal looks suddenly *very* interested in his soup bowl below his chin.

“It was not always a consistent thing,” he replies quietly.

“You don’t hide from God, do you hide your shame from me?”

“Your regard is more important to me than his, just as I am more likely to worship you than anyone else in this world.”

Will shakes his head, refusing to let the charm soothe any of his bitterness.

“I think you would always choose to defy God rather than worship him, even when you believe in him so *intimately*. You defy me, too, somehow always getting what you want. There’s always been something to be said for our relationship and unequal power dynamics, as much as I hate to concede to Alana’s criticisms. Turns out the trust between us really needs some work.”

“Is there something wrong with your soup, Will?” Hannibal asks. Will stirs repeatedly around the bowl without taking a bite, even though his stomach is empty and he can feel his hunger.

“What about the other ingredients? Is Alana in here?”

Hannibal looks bothered that Will would even ask, but finally gives in, perhaps a bit mournfully, “No. This meal is vegetarian, I assure you.”

Will takes his first bite. It tastes even better than it smells and he wonders if he really would have refused even if there were Alana meatballs hidden below. He has undoubtedly eaten his fair share of *mystery meat* in Hannibal’s company over the last while. Is he less of a cannibal than he already is if he abstains and waits for the nutrients in his body to be replaced with a different source? Is he less of a cannibal for being unaware, or is his excuse of ignorance too weak to even convince himself?

The taste makes him realize just how hungry he is and how long it’s been since his small breakfast this morning. He devours the soup in silence that Hannibal allows and then pushes the bowl away to slouch back in his gluttony. When he looks up, he realizes that Hannibal has barely touched his. He’s never one to leave his plate dirty.

Hannibal clears the table anyway. He hand washes each dish, the scrubbing turning into a constant white noise in the room. Excessive, anxious. Will allows him the time to panic, knowing even Hannibal can’t put it off forever now.

However, when the sun rises, Will might have less patience than he does in this borrowed time of the night.

Looking into his nearly-full cold cup of tea, Will says, “I think we might need something stronger.”

Hannibal nods once. He puts on coffee and wipes down the counters as he waits. Will taps his fingers on the table impatiently.

Hannibal pours their cups of coffee with a hearty amount of sweet liqueur. He carries the bottle of alcohol when he follows Will back to the living room.

“There are some doors that are simply better left closed,” Hannibal says, passing Will his coffee on the couch. Will drinks it back quickly even as it burns his tongue.

“Perhaps to some.” Will sits quietly and waits.

This might lead nowhere, he thinks. What does he expect? A sob story about a young Hannibal’s first kill? Hannibal would never be so trite. Whatever it is won’t make him pity Hannibal, and pity wouldn’t make him forgive Hannibal.

This is about something entirely else.

He can feel something simmering below the surface. He thinks he’s always felt it at the edges of Hannibal, a steady thrum of grief in his fingertips and in the lines around his eyes, no stranger to tears. He might not pity Hannibal, but he does sympathize with him. He thinks there’s something to that control that Hannibal grasps so tightly, and something to why he spiraled so out of control and showed Alana and Jack who he is.

Will tilts his head, appraising.

“Tell me about your sister?” Will asks.

Hannibal’s eyes flick up to him in warning.

Maybe part of him just wants to know. He still, against all his wishes, loves Hannibal and wants to hold every bit of him. Even this bit, which he knows is so deep and integral to Hannibal.

If Hannibal gives him something, maybe they can actually be equal. Or at least he can leave knowing he got to hold every part of Hannibal while he had him.

Hannibal watches him as if waiting for Will to change his mind, but then finally speaks. His accent sounds stronger, somehow. “She was born in a cold fall when I was nearly four years old.”

Will nods to urge him on. Hannibal squirms in his seat, something like a shrug, uncharacteristically awkward of him.

“The first thing I thought was that she looked like a wrinkled red baby squirrel. She was an ugly little thing, definitely did not get our mother’s looks.”

Will lets out a little chuckle. “Judgmental even of a baby, of course.”

“It is possible I was jealous of her takeover of my family’s attention. I actually wished that the eagle that sometimes soared over the castle would come to gather her up and transport her to some happy peasant home in a country far away. I imagined somewhere where the residents all looked like squirrels and she would fit right in. However, at the same time, I found that I loved her in a way that I could not help. When she was old enough, all I wanted to do was show her things, expose her to that feeling of discovery I had learning things in my early years.”

“You wanted to influence her,” Will says, thinking back to their last and only conversation about Mischa. “Like a father.”

“Like a father.” Hannibal sighs.

Will raises his eyebrows when Hannibal doesn't continue.

"To maintain this memory that I have, I built a memory palace," Hannibal suddenly explains. "A Jewish scholar introduced me to the concept at six years old. That scholar told me that to remember is not always a blessing, but I was naive and did not wish to forget a thing."

"I always assumed you must have an eidetic memory. A memory palace is something of a mnemonic device isn't it?"

"Yes, that is how I use it. I began construction with the most beautiful room I knew: my mother's room where Mischa's crib lay for her earliest years, with its many scents, faces carved in the woodwork, and a beautiful painted ceiling. It grew from there until my palace became vast and able to hold everything I experienced. Everywhere there are exhibits, each keyed to memories attached to other memories in geometric progression. If I am ever put away I will be able to live in those rooms and find peace, but they are not all light and bright. There are holes in the floor of the mind, you see. The spaces devoted to my earliest years are incomplete, sometimes static or fragmentary, like a reflection in shards of glass. Other rooms hold sound and motion, in which pleas and screaming fill it with the sense of great snakes wrestling and heaving in the dark, with the flash of lightning to hold a torch to the terror in momentary sight."

Will watches him in sympathy. He knows the darkness of the mind well. He just never expected Hannibal to fall into similar traps. Did Hannibal also fear what he would hit at the bottom if he fell?

Hannibal pauses. "You wish to hear my stories to understand me, but it is not where you will find an answer. Nothing happened to me that made me who I am. *I* happened."

"You misunderstand my motives. I'm not trying to explain you like some sleazy psychiatrist with a book deal. I'm trying to get you to let me in to see you as a whole person. I want it *because* of how vulnerable it is for you to share. I know what you are now so there are no more excuses to hide."

"You consider it that important to move forward?"

“I can’t promise that I will ever get past all that you’ve done, but if you still want a partnership with me, then that is the least that I require. It’s reciprocation. And I think at this point I deserve to see you fully just like you promised you’d try. I want to understand you. I need it to be clear what I am seeing.”

“I understand.” Hannibal drinks more of his coffee. “It will be a long story.”

Will sits back into the couch.

“We have time.”

Chapter End Notes

A lot of this chapter and the next are taken from Hannibal Rising! The worst Hannibal book that at least has some backstory gems in the first few chapters lol.

Chapter 24

Chapter Summary

> Will and Hannibal have a talk, after which Will has a lot to process and decides to explore their property alone.

Hannibal grabs Will's hand and traces it, line by line and finger by finger, then turns it over and interlocks their hands together.

"Mischa's hands were shaped like little stars when spread wide. She wasn't a particularly cleanly little girl, with a predisposition to getting into all sorts of mess. With her grubby hands she'd stamp little star shaped prints around the house. There was one painting in my mother's sewing room of the Bridge of Sighs in Venice that I was given the task of moving at one time. She told me not to smudge it, but of course Mischa was more difficult. She pressed her hand against the back, imprinting a little star on it. I wanted that star to last forever so I went back and traced it with chalk. After realizing the painting was okay, my parents were more amused than anything. I found that painting again many years later among other stolen artworks in the Jeu de Paume museum long after my home was ransacked. Even identifying it by its smudge, the curators would not let me touch it. The hand had mostly gone away, only one or two points of that little star left behind."

Will looks back toward the window. The rain hasn't stopped and the clouds still inhabit the entire sky. For a moment, it feels like the stars will never come out again. Maybe they never have for Hannibal. Hannibal rubs his palm absentmindedly.

"Being such a messy child, a great deal of time we spent together was for bathing. She had this little copper tub that I would bathe her in. I would dip one of her bracelets in the soapy water and blow bubbles to amuse her."

"Shockingly innocent," Will comments. It's hard to imagine Hannibal being a child, playing silly games with bubbles.

“Whatever it was, she could have made me stay,” Hannibal says. “She was my true family and I would have protected her. I had a different nature and I knew very well that I would never have been beholden to my teachers and family at the time. There is no way to be modest about my intelligence and intuition, and I did not even care for my parents that much, but for Mischa I would have forgiven every influence.”

“Even if she asked you to deny your nature?” Will asks.

“Perhaps even that, it is hard to truly know in hindsight.”

That stings, even if irrationally. Will doubts that Hannibal would ever do the same for him.

“I hope she would have accepted me,” Hannibal continues. “That is what family means to me. Acceptance.”

Hannibal looks pointedly at Will and Will looks down.

Hannibal moves from Will’s hand to touch his forearm instead. He traces his veins running down his wrist, blunt nails stroking the sensitive, pale skin on that part of his arm.

“It was a politically wrought time in Lithuania, with a reemergence and strengthening of the Nazi party. At one point it was so extreme that we left our castle to avoid being robbed, having been the wealthiest and most prominent family in a relative hotspot of attacks.”

“You grew up in a castle? Just how influential was your family?”

Hannibal’s eyes crinkle momentarily in amusement, which doesn’t quite cover his melancholy expression completely. “Your homegrown American background is showing. Yes, my family was relatively influential and I am a Count by technicalities.”

“By technicalities?”

“I will never step back on that property that I would have power in. That home is where I can never return.”

Will nods in understanding. A million questions knock around his head but a story is beginning to form in his mind.

It might be cruel to himself to learn so much. Every hole he fills in or the puzzle of Hannibal seems to make him love him more. His chest burns with the tragedy he knows is to come, that time that Hannibal can barely stand to speak of.

“My family took residence in a faraway property in the woods to be more discreet and hidden safely away when I was 8-years-old. You must understand that it was a nasty recession and we had few liquid resources to protect ourselves. Nonetheless, this was the greatest mistake we made. Those organization members, driven out by the civilization nearby, came across us after having been divided, dwindled, bruised, and *hungry.* See, it was a brutal winter and they had been run out of their previous town. They traveled and searched, fuelled by their hatred, for a property to scavenge. And they found us.”

Will shivers, suddenly ice cold. He takes another sip of his coffee, but it has cooled down.

“I can see where this is going.”

“They killed my father first, and then my mother,” he says, almost casual. “Burned down the house, and left the bodies charcoal and unrecognizable. They were killed with simple bullets first, fast, and I only saw my mother’s body before the flames spread to her too. I barely thought anything of it, but I protected Mischa.”

“Guns lack intimacy while fire consumes,” Will says.

Hannibal nods and then goes silent. Will waits but the second tick by and he does not continue.

He had been doing so well, Will thinks, but is suddenly silent and masked.

“Hannibal?” he whispers.

“Turn around.”

“What?”

“Turn around so I can tell you,” Hannibal says, making a twirling motion with his finger.

Will opens his mouth to speak, but decides not to question Hannibal. Will pushes himself up with his hands and turns to face away from Hannibal, even though he doesn’t like it. He wants to see what is in Hannibal’s eyes.

“I do not want to see your pity,” Hannibal says. “I do not want your condolences. I would appreciate it if you kept all of that to yourself.”

Will nods in understanding. Hannibal strokes his arms up and down from behind, touching him so frantically that Will thinks it’s probably more of a nervous tick at this point.

“The men, six in total, the names of which I spent years trying to remember and years since trying to forget, chained us up in the barn. The metal rings were cold enough to give us frostbite, so I tucked them over Mischa clothing, but there was no escaping that kind of cold. Cold that sinks into your bones and makes them rattle. She was coughing and feverish within a day.”

Will touches Hannibal’s forearms where he’s held, unsurprised to find the raised goosebumps that don’t leave even when Will rubs up and down to gain friction.

“There was little food as well. At one point they had killed a baby deer, already half starving and thin, and gave us some bones to chew on and soup. Soon enough the men were hungry again.”

Hannibal set his forehead against the nape of Will’s neck.

“It’s one of my favorite things about you,” Hannibal says. It’s mumbly and muffled against Will’s skin, missing the articulateness Will is so used to, like Hannibal is talking in his sleep.

“Hm?”

“You are warm. You run so hot. I can never stay warm, but it’s warm sleeping next to you.”

Will feels tears breach his eyes. “You can tell me what happened,” he whispers, still rubbing Hannibal’s arms behind him. He feels cold too, on the inside, but he hopes his skin is still warm to the touch.

“It is not a story to be shared.”

“Unless you consider me a part of you,” Will says, not sure how much is the truth and how much is manipulation on his part.

Hannibal pauses, seemingly considering, and then does speak, quiet and fast and automatic, like he’s just trying to push it away from himself.

“My conscious memory stopped not much later on, though I recovered what I could. Memories are fickle things, and curses more often than not. It is healthy to forget, and you are not likely to have a second chance to forget.” He smacks his lips together. “She couldn’t say my name. She said it like *‘Annibah! Annibah!*”

Will turns his head just slightly, listening, waiting. Hannibal gulps in his ear.

“They caught another baby deer. I saw it cooking in that little copper pot I used to bathe her in, and they gave me a warm cup of soup and some bones to nibble on.”

Will squeezes his eyes shut. Understanding. Still, the urge comes to make Hannibal say it.

“When did you know for sure that they made you eat her?”

The back of Will’s neck is wet. Will’s tears have breached his eyes, too, but he stays quiet, determined not to show Hannibal anything that could be construed as pity.

“I would have willingly eaten all of her that I could. It was the last I had left of her.”

Will nods. He understands.

Hannibal breathes in deeply. “It was her baby teeth left in the stool pit. That’s all I remember.”

“And you reciprocated. You killed the men,” Will says.

Hannibal sits up quickly. “Of course. Eventually,” he says stiffly.

Will sees in his mind the attacks that Hannibal would have carried out, but they’re not beautiful. Ugly from the spite of revenge, meat he would have been sick on, but at least it was meat that once consumed parts of Mischa.

And with that thought, Will knows it wasn’t this trauma that made him who he was. He never would have become such a beautiful, masterful killer on the backs of war criminals. It was something else entirely. It was just Hannibal.

Slowly, giving enough time for Hannibal to stop him, Will turns in his seat. Hannibal's eyes are wet, the skin surrounding red and swollen. He looks older. Ancient with the throes of grief. At the same time, Will can almost picture him as a little boy, wise beyond his years and with a chain stuck to the skin of his neck with the cold. Angry and fighting for his and Mischa's life, and for the only time he's ever been in his life, completely out of control.

Looking at Hannibal now, he knows the story is over for the night. He doesn't seem to want to say anything at all. Then Will remembers: Hannibal went mute after Mischa's death.

The silence is uncomfortable because Will knows it will last. He's so used to Hannibal taking the lead and filling the air. He might joke about it another time, and say *finally, some peace and quiet around here.* There's no peace in the air, though, just dug up horrors and released ghosts.

Hannibal is shivering too. Will stands and takes Hannibal's arms with him.

"Come. We'll go rest as much as we can."

Hannibal seems unable to look him in the eyes too, so Will doesn't try, and just wraps an arm around his back to lead him to their room. He flicks off every lightswitch on their way and climbs the stairs in the dark. They stop in the washroom to get ready side by side. He pisses, not caring that Hannibal is nearby. They're close enough for just about anything now, he reckons.

He steps out to look for more comfortable clothes in the closet, but then remembers that skin-to-skin contact is about as warm as it gets. When Hannibal gets out of the washroom, Will strips them both down naked and gets them in bed. He can still hear the rain on the window and he hopes it keeps going all night. It seems this world is bound to flood, he might as well let himself get drenched while he can.

He would have had some psychological explanation for Hannibal's chills before, but when he crawls under the covers next to Hannibal, he finds his skin actually is ice cold. He pulls Hannibal in close and Hannibal burrows into his chest, filling up Will's arms. They overlap

their legs until they're more comfortable, groins pressed together but both soft and looking only for closeness.

At the moment, it feels more intimate than the times they've had sex. It makes him feel almost nervous. Will decides not to speak, knowing anything would just be left hanging without a reply, and Hannibal would resent any platitudes even close to pity.

Instead he tries to exude his feelings through simply pulling close.

First, understanding, and not in some superficial way, but as *real* sight into this part of Hannibal.

Admiration, because even Will can see that who Hannibal is, murder and madness and all, or even *because* of that murder and madness, is almost unbearably beautiful and artful in everything he does and not a single piece of it was smothered by his past.

And finally, love. Because even if they can't ever truly be together with their different philosophies, it's here right now, burning a hole in his chest.

If they won't be together forever like Will had planned for, then at least he can hold him close right now.

It hurts more than he ever thought it would.

He doesn't sleep, which he could blame on the midnight coffee, but he thinks he has enough excuses for his restlessness at this point. Hannibal does sleep, surprisingly, through the shivering and all. Thinking about it now, Will doesn't know if he's ever been awake while Hannibal slept, not with his fuzzy drugged mind. It's uncharacteristically vulnerable of Hannibal to do so now. Does he understand that Will has considered killing him to put an end to it all?

Hannibal twitches and murmurs in his sleep and Will gently jostles him like he might do to one of his dogs crying in their sleep. Each time, Hannibal awakens with a noise of surprise and then goes quiet again until he's breathing easily. Will genuinely wonders if he's ever let himself sleep like this before, not being entirely alert to his surroundings.

It would be all too easy to slide out of bed and grab a knife from the kitchen. He'd sit astride Hannibal's chest and let him wake up before gliding it across his throat. Hannibal would keep his knives perfectly sharpened and it would slice across his skin like butter. The blood would pool into the sheets and soak Will's bare knees. He wonders if Hannibal would fight back, even now in this vulnerable state, or if he'd give up his control for that one moment it would take Will to cut deep enough.

It wouldn't be as satisfying if Hannibal isn't fully present, lost inside the corridors of his mind, so Will stays, restless and repeating the fantasy over and over in his head in different variations, while holding Hannibal close like he means to protect him from any dangers that may come his way.

At dawn, Will is sick of laying in bed. The sky has cleared and he wants to take a good look at this property. He successfully extracts himself from Hannibal's side and finds some warm clothes to brave the morning air.

He turns Hannibal's coffee maker on and then steps outside onto the porch. He checks his disposable phone and considers waking up Abigail to talk, but to do that to a teenager at *this* hour just seems cruel.

Thick trees surround the property, even obscuring the approaching road. It makes this little cabin feel protected, even though he's sure there are others in this area with private summer homes. There are a few lawn chairs with droplets of water on their seats and a large charcoal barbeque. Without the rain he can definitely hear some steady running water coming from the south side.

He steps down into the wet grass and does a loop of the entire cabin to admire the construction. He goes past an unused fire pit, and to a large shed by the trees. He pulls on the lock on the door, but it doesn't budge. Did Hannibal have more keys with him? He tries to recall if he heard the rattling of a key ring when he opened the front door.

He returns to the cabin and grabs his coffee first, sighing at the first warm sip. He digs through Hannibal's coat pockets by the front door and finds a ring of three keys.

The second one he tries fits the lock and he opens the shed to find a variety of garden and yard tools, a nice lawnmower, and none other than a set of fishing gear.

He huffs, getting closer to take a look. There's even waders hanging up and a fully stocked tacklebox with ties just like his. Did Hannibal take some from his desk? When he looks closer there seems to be different bits of items in them. He'll have to ask Hannibal how far he's gone to spoil Will.

He has a lot of time to kill and if there's anything that will help put his mind at ease, it's this. He needs time to process everything he's learned and this is about the best way he can. He can catch them some food for dinner so that he can be certain of the source.

He finishes his coffee on the way back to the house, finds a fishing vest he hadn't noticed in the front closet, and returns for the fishing gear.

He follows the noise of the rushing water and finds a river not too far from the property. It's high and moving fast from the rain last night, so he walks a little ways, looking for a safer spot to get in. It's nice out here, anyway. If they're here for a while, he'd like to explore more of the surrounding woodland. He suddenly wishes he'd brought his dogs.

It's for the best that he can't stay here long. He needs to return to Abigail and his dogs for one thing, but he also needs to figure out what to do about Hannibal. He can't be at a standstill and pretend he's in a fairytale anymore, even if these picturesque woods fit that narrative aesthetically.

If it wasn't for Abigail, he might be tempted.

He doesn't know if he can trust Hannibal. Realistically, a lot of the things he's done point to a solid no. Can a man like that change? He already *has* changed Hannibal, he's certain. Last

night's vulnerable admission was proof enough of that. Can he change enough to allow them to compromise and make a relationship work?

Is it insane to even want such a thing? His baseline of what is even normal has shifted so much. Blood into wine and body into bread; a knife now can deliver a kiss. He sought to catch criminals and now he's considering letting the worst one go, or even following him into the darkness.

He follows the bend of the river, so lost in his own thoughts that he jolts when he sees a figure. Another man—another *fisher*man—across the river. He wasn't expecting to see anyone else out in these woods where they feel so isolated. It feels like an intrusion, and he hasn't even been here a day to call this river his own.

Will finds himself stuck between two pulls: first the urge to turn back and avoid the awkward social interaction and questions to come, and second, the resignation to just get through the inevitable small talk so he can go on his merry way after having been an acceptably pleasant human being. It would be nice to ask someone more experienced about how the fishing is around here.

He walks further down his bank of the river. The man has spotted him and the least he can do is get a bit closer to greet him so they're not yelling from an awkwardly far distance. He puts up his hand to wave and then freezes with his arm in the air. His eyebrows twitch in confusion.

Recognition. The man across the river is a bit older and strong and staring at Will with wide, knowing eyes.

The man runs in the opposite direction.

"Hey!" Will yells, dropping his fishing rod on the grass so he can get closer and try to see him.

It clicks, and he knows who the man is.

The Skyscraper Slayer. Jonas—Leo Jonas Patrick, the man who nearly *killed* Will.

Without really thinking about it, Will runs forward, crashing into the river water which rides all the way up to his hips. He falls to the side, overtaken by the current that's even stronger than it looked. He smashes his ankles against the rocks painfully, head entirely submerged in the freezing morning water, before pushing himself up into a standing position.

He shakes his head to whip his hair out of his eyes, panting and sputtering water. He stumbles and falls against the current but pushes his way desperately across the water. Damn, they couldn't have been in a shallower spot?

Slow and drenched, he makes it to the other side of the river and pulls himself up onto the bank, ripping out grass in his fists and scratching his palms. He rolls himself onto the soggy, muddy bank, and quickly pushes himself up. He kicks off his sloshing waders that have filled with water and would only slow him down. He takes only a second to shiver and shake off, and then he runs right into the woods after the man that nearly threw him off a building and cursed him with dozens of nightmares.

He can't think about the consequences right now. He's gotten a second opportunity to hunt and avenge what he fucked up before. He doesn't intend to miss the second time.

Chapter 25

Chapter Summary

Will goes after Jonas, considering what he's prepared to do to enact justice.

Will wastes a minute trying to determine which way Jonas went. He runs back from where the current carried him down the river and crouches down to find the grass that's been trampled underfoot. He finds a natural path that's been cleared out through repeated use and Will breaks off into a run.

He runs quickly but carefully. It will set him back even more if he trips over the roots or alerts his arrival with too much noise. Jonas has already had a headstart and likely knows these woods far better than Will does.

For a moment, he wonders if he's mistaken and running through the woods like a madman for no good reason. It's an insane coincidence, but then again, with Hannibal here, there are probably few coincidences. Will growls out loud at the thought, at being left in the dark *again.*

His heartbeat is picking up, adrenaline rising, and the exertion is nothing compared to his determination. He pumps through the tiredness. Coincidence or not, he's going to find him while he's here. Maybe *this* is what he needs to get his mind at ease. A second chance, a free pass, just a taste of this world out in the middle of nowhere.

He runs along the path for a few minutes without a sign of Jonas. It's possible that Jonas took off in a new direction to lose Will. In that case, it would take a lot longer to hunt him through the woods. It's unlikely, though. Jonas depended on a number of tools for his kills. In all likelihood, he's returning to his homebase for resources rather than opting to run free and wild.

Soon enough, a cabin similar to his own comes into view. He's found his neighbor, Will is sure of it.

He stops behind a tree, holding onto the bark and catching his breath. He circles in the line of the trees to get a feel for the place and scope out each potential entrance.

Finally he runs closer, stepping up to the door and assessing the windows close up. It will be difficult to get any open without making a noise.

Unless.

He feels in his pocket for the ring of keys that Hannibal had. Three keys. Cabin door, shed, and what?

He pushes the key in the lock carefully and it turns with a gentle *click*.

That bastard.

He slips off his shoes on the porch and steps inside in his socks to stay quiet. He creeps along the hall, hands at the ready.

The house is silent, but Will knows better. He can *feel* him.

The layout is almost identical to the cabin Hannibal took him to. Twin properties bought, enemies housed next to each other like two feral dogs in a fighting ring.

He pauses near a doorway, ear to the wall to listen. He slows his own breathing and feels his heartbeat even out. He is calm. Way calmer than he expected to be. He considers his potential. He's always known he had the mind for this, hasn't he?

Will smiles, and then he speaks through the wall.

“We’re far from the skyscrapers you scale. Not many tall lookouts down here. Not many places for people to trip and fall 200 odd feet or so.”

Will steps into the doorway with his hands raised in the air. Jonas stands across the room, aiming a shotgun at Will’s chest.

“You’re more comfortable down at eye level though, aren’t you?” Will asks. “No castle on the hill or ivory tower where you’re merely a peasant on the ground. You just had to climb those buildings to see over them.”

“How did you find me? You weren’t supposed to be here.”

“The same person who suggested you come here, who else? Did you really think you could trust him?”

“I could trust him enough.” He’s wearing a flannel similar to Will’s and his graying beard has grown out. He looks messy but in an isolated lumberjack kind of way. He also looks strong, determination in his red ringed eyes.

“Do you know how rich and out of touch Hannibal Lecter is? Didn’t you ever think about killing him?”

“Of course I did,” Jonas says defensively. “He was going to be next.”

“Ah, using him to get to me, and then splat? Maybe both of us together?”

“You were so close to falling last time. Did you feel how close you were? A second later and it would have worked,” he says, voice shaking slightly.

“When exactly did you get into contact with Hannibal?”

“Before you. He came to me, listened to me, and told me you would come. That finally someone would understand as they fell.”

Will tries not to betray his surprise at that. Hannibal must have been planning this for ages. Even in the past couple of days he never stopped to think that that might have been his fault too. Will looks around at the fine living room that Jonas stands in. “And then he gave you the out to escape?”

“I called him after and he helped me. Said I could get another chance.”

Will nods. “What you need to know is Hannibal is always in control. He’s selfish, too. He wants to be entertained, but it’s not as fun to just give one person the upper hand. There are no sides. He took me out here too to find you, too.”

Jonas shifts on his feet. “What are you getting at here? I can just shoot you whenever I want.”

“Yeah, but I know you, and that’s not satisfying. That’s just murder. And self-defense, at that. What kind of self-respecting, independent man spends all his life planning his legacy just to shoot someone in the chest?”

Jonas watches him.

“I didn’t really understand you that much before you attacked me. I was sick and distracted more often than not at that time. When I was tied up is when I really saw what you were doing, and I’ve had a lot of time to stew on that since then.”

“Yeah?”

“I got caught up in the draw and the comfort of normality. I was so blind and I really needed someone to push me over. My blindness allowed Hannibal to manipulate me over these past few months. Even after that time he almost cost me my life with you, he fostered codependency and upended my whole life, isolated me from everyone else, cost me my job, and now might be sending me to jail.” As he says it, he realizes just how close to the truth it is.

Jonas chuckles darkly, but Will thinks his grip on the gun has loosened there a bit. “Tough luck there, buddy.”

“It doesn’t feel right to go to law enforcement. It’s never helped me before, not even *being* one, and it sure won’t help me now with the mess I’m in.” Will barks out a laugh. “Actually I have a funny feeling that they’d all just be on his side no matter what.”

“I wouldn’t be surprised,” Jonas says.

“I want to get back at him. Don’t know if I can do it alone. He’s more dangerous than I thought and it might be good to have help to do some real justice. I mean, what do *you* have to lose?”

Jonas finally lowers his gun.

“How do I know I can trust you?” Jonas asks.

“How can I not want to, now that I understand you?”

Jonas tries to hold it in, but he still beams momentarily at the hidden compliment, before recovering his stoic expression. “What exactly are you suggesting?”

Will puts his hand out as if trying to place something. “What was it you used? K? If you still have some, I can try to knock him out before he expects us. Say I’ve just been fishing.”

“And if he fights?”

“Come as backup. See, I can probably get the needle in him but I’m not so sure I could subdue him quickly enough.”

Jonas hesitates again.

“I wouldn’t ask and come here risking my life if I wasn’t desperate,” Will continues, trying to look as genuine as possible. “All I want is to get back at him. I want *justice.*”

“I… Okay. This way, then,” Jonas says, leaving the gun on the table. He still looks hesitant, but he finally walks past Will anyway.

Will follows him up the stairs and into his bedroom which looks more lived in than the rest of this place. It shows some of his restlessness and anger, sheet kicked off the end and clothes strewn around the room. Dirty cups, one smashed against the wall, and the bitter smell of old food.

“Ignore the mess,” he mumbles, pulling out a sock in the back of his sock drawer and unraveling a tied baggy of powder.

“Walk me through this then?” Will asks.

He pulls out a measuring scale from the back of the drawer and kneels at the side table.

“I’ll get it set up. It’s easy, don’t worry about veins and inject it intramuscularly. I have a tranquilizer if that doesn’t work fast enough.”

Will watches carefully as he gets the needle ready, squirting some out the end to check.

Will holds out his hand. Jonas stares at it warily.

"Why don't I hold onto this for now?" Jonas says. "Don't want you stabbing yourself on the way there."

Will assents, putting his hands into his pockets. He follows close behind as Jonas fiddles with it.

This plan *is* a valid option. They might be able to take Hannibal down together, especially since he's already emotional and withdrawn and won't be on guard for an attack.

It would be a form of justice. It's just not the kind of justice Will wants. If he deals with Hannibal in that way, he will deal with him *alone.*

Just as he takes the first step down the staircase, Will lurches forward and pushes Jonas as hard as he can.

There's no more time to wait now, and Will lurches into action. He's scrambling down the stairs while Jonas is still airborne, and it's as if it's in slow motion until it's *not,* and there's a sickening string of bumps and knocks—Jonas crashing his hip against the carpeted stairs and kicking the wall in an attempt to slow down but tumbling ass over tea kettle anyway, an agonized, frustrated groan leaving his throat. Will catches sight of the needle that Jonas dropped, just as Will had hoped.

Jonas slams into the wall where the staircase makes a turn just as Will gets his hand on the needle. He's too close, though, and Jonas grabs Will's ankle, yanking him down the stairs so hard that he bumps down on his ass and slides right into Jonas.

He has the needle, though, and he aims for any bit of skin he can, but Jonas is faster than Will expected he would be from taking him by surprise. Jonas grabs his wrist in a steel grip, holding Will up from stabbing him in a shaking fist.

“Fucking traitor,” Jonas growls.

Will is considering what chances he has in a fight of muscle with gravity on his side, when Jonas suddenly uses gravity to *his* advantage, and next thing he knows he’s being rolled over top and pulled down the rest of the stairs.

They slide together, bumping backward down the longer stretch of steps until they hit the bottom and Jonas lands on top of Will, sharp hip landing its weight on his stomach and knocking the wind out of him.

Will fights to keep a steel grip on the needle, groaning and gasping, just as Jonas keeps a steel grip around his wrist. His wrist is definitely bruised by now if not sprained by the exertion and twisting to try and get Will to drop it. Jonas leans his heavier weight on Will to pin him down and Will, coughing and wincing, fears he’s going to lose this fight to him—*again.*

He takes his chance and flings the needle as hard as he can with a flick of the wrist. It doesn’t go far, but it’s enough to get Jonas off of him and lunging for it.

Will scrambles after him and knocks his already-throbbing fist down against the back of Jonas’ head at the base of his skull. It’s not as hard as he wanted it to be but it still knocks him to his stomach, so Will jumps on top of him.

Jonas is quick when he blindly stabs Will with the needle, straight through his cheek and into his tongue. A muffled shriek rises from Will’s throat at the sharp pain and he instinctively throws himself back.

He grabs for the base of the needle, thankful to find that he wasn’t able to push down. He yanks it out before he can think too hard about it and lets blood and spit dribble out of his open and cringing mouth.

He watches Jonas rub the back of his head. Jonas pushes himself to standing and Will scrambles to his feet too. Will looks at the needle in his hand. This could be his chance.

Except, he doesn't really want to fight with drugs to aid him.

He throws the needle at the hallway wall hard enough that the case shatters.

Jonas stares at it, dumbfounded, and Will takes advantage and barrels him back to the ground.

With leverage finally, Will punches him in the face. Jonas blinks rapidly as if in a daze and he only just starts to squirm when Will hits him again, and again, and Jonas' attempts to fight back become too weak to stop anything

Will punches him repeatedly and without abandon, straddled over his chest and with knees pinning his arms. One shot after the other, thinking back to that time his father taught him to punch, *really* punch. He came home with a broken nose so bad it left Will's septum uneven for the rest of his life, and it was far from the first bruise or bloody lip he'd gotten. His dad told him that there was a time to fight, that there were bad people out there, and that Will would have to be the one to deliver justice when no one else did it for him. He brings a fist down hard into Jonas' mouth, enough to knock teeth and splatter blood back at himself. He doesn't *want* anyone else to deliver this justice for him.

This could be Hannibal below him. They are of similar age and build and if Will doesn't look too closely through his red haze, he sees his lover there. The shape of antlers stretching out of his head and charcoal skin, his monster in *full.* Now with bloody teeth and bleary eyes and somehow, still, a look full of love and adoration for Will

This justice would be for all of the lies and the betrayals, for being *who Hannibal is.* Finding Jonas here is just the cherry on top—what other manipulations from Hannibal will he unravel?

It feels good to punch, over and over again, not a care in the world for anything but what *he* wants, but then the head below him wobbles loosely at a hit with shaking blank eyes and Will hesitates.

He's punching a dead man.

He slaps the man's cheek below, trying frantically to wake him up, but then he realizes that it's Jonas looking up at him, not Hannibal. He scrambles away from the corpse and sits against the wall.

He doesn't know how long Jonas has been dead, how long Will has been lost in his mind and inflicting violence. His entire body is shaking with exertion and adrenaline.

He pulls up his knee and puts his head down, panting. He tongues at the wounds in his mouth, tasting metallic.

It would be so much easier if he just hated Hannibal. It would be easier if Hannibal was wrong about him and his potential for violence. If Will didn't enjoy what he just did. It would be easier if Will wasn't so drawn to him despite everything.

Somehow, against everything that he expected would happen if something he ever did like this, he's not fighting nausea or crying or having any sort of mental breakdown. His heart is beating normally and his skin is tingling pleasantly. Euphoria licks up his insides so strongly he doesn't quite know what to do with that, but he can't deny that with each breath, his adrenaline is replaced with a rolling calmness. He feels like how he does after sex with Hannibal or in the midst of a good dream.

He would love to hate Hannibal and everything that he is but he just wants him so badly right now. If anything, he's even farther from knowing what to do.

First, though, he has a body to deal with.

Chapter 26

Chapter Notes

i posted a little abigail pov fic that goes up to chapter 15 if anyone wants to read here!

Will pushes himself off the floor, horribly aware of all his aches and pains. It hurts even worse when he gets a grip under Jonas' armpits and pulls him out the front door.

He gets Jonas' body down the porch steps and toward the car he saw on the property—no doubt the one he was kidnapped in before—when he hears the engine of another car coming closer.

Will drops the corpse and turns. There's no chance of hiding it now, but there's clearly no need when he sees his own little car pull around the bend with Hannibal in the front. He gets out and Will sees he's wearing an aviator jacket and slacks that look unfairly good on him. Was dressing in sexy casual wear another gift he planned to give Will on this weekend getaway? And here Will is, bruised and sweaty and still damp from the river water.

Hannibal comes closer, tilting his head at the corpse. "It didn't take you long at all to find him," Hannibal comments.

"No?" Will laces his voice with sarcasm. "We were next door neighbors, did you not expect a friendly visit?"

"I did not expect you to find him the morning after we arrived. I planned to prepare you a little better beforehand."

"Oh, but full honesty was too much to hope for?"

Hannibal comes up to Will and grasps under his jaw to look at his cheek, which Will imagines is as red and swollen as it feels. He jerks back but Hannibal holds him tight. It gets his heart beating more than murdering Jonas did.

“This blood splatter isn’t your own,” Hannibal says in wonder.

Will shakes his head jerkily.

“You surprised me,” he says with pride. Will can’t stop the warm feeling that elicits in his chest.

“I didn’t do it for you.”

Hannibal leans into his face excitedly. “That is the last thing I wanted you to do. This needed to be something you did entirely for yourself, and in that way, I couldn’t think of a better way than you stumbling upon it yourself.”

Will can barely stop himself from leaning forward the rest of the way to kiss him, but now is not the time.

“Was it all me? You’ve been pushing me to this.”

“I’ve been encouraging what is already inside of you trying to get out.”

“Yeah? And what if you’re wrong?”

Hannibal merely looks at the corpse on the grass with a smile and then gently lifts up Will’s hand. Looking down, Will notices how bloodied and bruised his knuckles are and flexes his hand to feel the sting. Hannibal bends down to kiss them, and then licks the blood off his lips as he rises. Will stares.

“At first I was worried about where you had gone this morning when I awoke alone. It only eased my mind slightly to still see the car in the yard, but then I found your abandoned fishing rod and knew something was amiss,” Hannibal says.

“What, you thought I had just snuck out and left you here?” Will asks.

“It was difficult to discern how much you resented me after the events of the last few days, or how you felt about what I shared last night. If you only wanted to make me share to hurt me more.”

Will leans in a bit closer. “I wouldn’t do that to you. I mean, I need closure too. Or would. I really don’t know what I’m going to do. I don’t know anything.”

Nothing feels satisfying. Even if he left Hannibal now, if he ever found out that Hannibal went to show himself to someone else, someone like Bedelia, Will would be back within minutes to strike them down. He would need to know where Hannibal was and what he was doing and who he was doing it with at all times. He doesn’t want him to have anything else but Will, but he doesn’t know if he wants Hannibal in the way that Hannibal wants them to be. Killing a murderer is one thing. Hannibal is no vigilante.

Would it feel as good as this did? Would it feel better to take his time, commemorate them?

Or will he have to kill Hannibal to truly escape the pull?

Hannibal lifts his head until his lips meet Will’s forehead. “Stay with me,” he says against him, almost begging. “It will be us together. All of us, if you’d like. We’ll leave together.”

The dream flashes through his mind. The same one that has been in his head before, but instead of filling his little house in Wolf Trap, they’re in a new location. Would it be Florence for Abigail’s school? Would Hannibal buy Will everything he would ever need, an entirely new wardrobe and world there waiting for him, prebuilt and preordained?

Will pulls back, even as he's digging his hand into Hannibal's jacket like he never wants to let go.

"Let's get back," Will says. "Help me get the body in the trunk?"

They find a tarp to wrap him in and Hannibal tries to wave away help without success. Will knows that Hannibal has probably lugged around dozens of dead weight bodies on his own, but Will still grabs Jonas' wrapped up legs. He doesn't end up carrying too much of the weight when his wrist throbs painfully.

Hannibal drives them back to the cabin.

"One second," Will says when they enter the front door. He goes to their room and finds his phone, quickly dialing Abigail's number. He feels guilty that he has no updates, at least not for her to hear. His own life has been updated and modified in a million ways since their conversation last night, but he's not going to tell her any of that. He checks that Abigail and the dogs are okay and is relieved to find that she's just bored. He promises to call her after another day at the latest and then hangs up.

He finds Hannibal in the kitchen with a basin of water. Hannibal pulls their chairs close and beckons him over. The curtains are all drawn, making it feel a bit like the morning was all a fantasy.

Hannibal washes his bloody knuckles in a warm tub of water with devastating care and tenderness. It reminds him a bit of the aftermath of his last confrontation with Jonas when Hannibal took him back home and patched him up. It had felt so comforting to be cared for for once, and he's sure his growing attraction to Hannibal distracted him from a much worse breakdown. Little did he know that Hannibal had set up his demise. Did he feel even a bit of guilt, or did he consider it a necessary step in Will's acceptance of himself?

He can't deny that it still feels comforting to be cared for, even though Hannibal technically set this fight up as well. Ring of fighting dogs indeed.

“Did you think about me when you were there?” Hannibal asks, pulling Will’s hands out to dry.

“Perhaps not in the way you’d want me to.”

Hannibal smiles at him devilishly. “You fantasized about killing me?”

“The monster I have seen you as. Who is you, in many ways.”

Hannibal looks at him with fascination.

“You are far too excited about that prospect,” Will comments.

“It would be a beautiful way to go, by your hands.”

“I can’t do it now. You’d be far too pleased,” Will mumbles. A weak joke that somehow still makes Hannibal chuckle. Hannibal likes him far too much for his own good, he thinks.

Hannibal wraps his bloody knuckles up in a strip of gauze. He then feels his wrist and optimistically diagnoses it a sprain, wrapping it up much tighter. It throbs but it isn’t that bad.

Hannibal looks over his face like he’s trying to memorize what he sees before he wipes the blood splatters away with a damp cloth.

Finally, he checks Will’s mouth, fingers prodding past his teeth and filling his mouth. Will’s mind goes in different directions again and he has to concentrate to stop himself from sucking or licking at the hands inside his mouth, especially when Hannibal isn’t shy or gentle with him, feeling far enough back that Will just about gags. He flicks his eyes up from Will’s mouth to stare into Will’s, taking his fingers out slower than he needs to. And then he leans in.

If Will had any chance at self control, it dissipates when Hannibal kisses him before he can dodge it, replacing his hands with his mouth in seconds. Hands hold him tight until Will melts into it, sliding their tongues together with relief. He missed this an excessive amount for being apart only a couple of days. The adrenaline and euphoria of killing makes it feel even *better.* Hannibal pulls back and kisses his cheek where the needle stabbed him.

“This is what I’m trying not to do, you know,” Will says.

“Tell me no then,” Hannibal whispers, lining up their faces again so that their lips just barely graze each other.

Will stares into his eyes without saying a word.

“Tell me no,” Hannibal repeats, kissing his lips briefly.

“Would you stop trying even if I did?”

“Would you want me to?”

Will pauses. One last hit before going cold turkey isn’t such a bad idea. He’s already getting hard at the thought and is practically salivating with desire.

He winces and gives in, putting a hand up to the back of Hannibal’s head. “Just take me to bed.”

Hannibal looks briefly victorious and Will shoots him a warning glance. This doesn’t have to mean anything, other than Hannibal being good in bed and Will wanting to feel something nice for a change.

They stand up together and Hannibal presses close as they walk together, kissing Will and pulling an arm around his waist.

Hannibal leads him to the stairs in no rush, kissing him every step of the way and pushing him up against each wall they pass, more desperate than he usually seems. Will imagines them tripping backward on the twin staircase and brawling like he did with Jonas, but Hannibal is as steady as a brick house.

That tumble he and Jonas took was like a sad substitute for his skyscraper dives. Will suddenly has an idea for what he wants to do with the body.

“Any cliffs around here?” Will asks, hooking an arm around Hannibal’s neck to cling as he grinds close, nearly to the top floor but pressed to the side wall with Hannibal licking up his jaw.

“Not nearby, but I have a property on the edge of one. I’ll take you there.”

Either he knows what Will wants to do, or he’s just happy to grant Will whatever he asks for. It’s a thrilling concept, the normal boundaries between them breaking down to find Hannibal just as obsessive and possessive as Will has tried to avoid showing himself to be.

Will gasps at a hard bite on his throat, jerking hard enough that he bangs his head into the wall behind him. Hannibal pauses, thumbing the indentation leftover, whether in consideration or admiration. Will thinks it’s the latter. He flicks his eyes up to Will’s looking for his reaction.

“Don’t hold back, okay?” Will says. “Give me you. I know what you do—focus on me and try to please me just to keep me around. Let *go* for once.”

Hannibal spins them and walks Will backward with a hand up under his jaw, leaving Will unbalanced but trusting of Hannibal’s grip all the way until he’s pushed back onto the bed. He’s not alone for a second before Hannibal’s weight is smothering him into the mattress.

“Tell me how it felt,” Hannibal says.

Will gasps at their bodies rubbing together, tilting his head up to breathe. He has a feeling Hannibal won’t be letting him up for air anytime soon. They scoot up to the headboard together without breaking apart.

“Tell me what you did,” Hannibal says, his voice deep and gravelly with lust as he buries his face in Will’s neck.

Will gulps as Hannibal bites and kisses along his throat.

“I chased him through the woods, used your key to get in.”

“Mhm?”

“Stepped into the room where he held a shotgun at me, but talked him down and into working together—working together to kill you instead.”

Hannibal lifts up, staring down at him with hooded eyelids. “Because you understand him.”

Will nods. “I convinced him, followed him up to his supply. I was going to take his needle and inject him.”

“Mm?”

“He didn’t give it up so easily, so I pushed him down the stairs and we tussled for it. He overpowered me briefly, landed on top of me, but then I threw the needle and hit him when he lunged for it.”

“Good boy.” Hannibal moves down his body, pushing up his shirt to kiss him there.

“I got the needle from him but then decided I didn’t want that advantage. I wanted to use my hands, so I did. I beat him to death. If it was you, I’d have used my hands too.”

Will lifts his hands to Hannibal’s face. Sharp cheekbones, pouting mouth. He imagines shattering it under his fist, bursting blood vessels and breaking skin. He drags his fingers down Hannibal’s cheeks and to his neck, grasping his throat. Hannibal made it clear how much he liked hurting Will here. Will gets it now; the power of his hands to slowly drain his life, slow and intimate, even more drawn out if he wants it to. Or he could slit his throat and let the blood flow over him, if only it wouldn’t be over too quickly.

“It is intimate that way, savage; you showed him a new way to kill. *Your* way to kill, with all of your intuition and knowledge of what is beautiful,” Hannibal says, looking up at him from under eyelashes and deep brow bones. He moves further down and Will loses his grasp on his throat, but Hannibal pulls down his pants and Will doesn’t mind.

Hannibal takes him in his mouth and sucks. He sinks down until Will feels the tightness of his throat open and Will bucks up instinctively, panting and gulping back the saliva in his own mouth. What Hannibal makes him feel really is akin to hunger.

Hannibal keeps moving up and down, slobbering down Will’s cock. Will pulls off his t-shirt which is growing even more plastered with his sweat and still smells like the river.

He’s getting far too close far too fast but Hannibal doesn’t let him come, working his way back up his body with his mouth. Will grasps his face tenderly, suddenly remembering how vulnerable Hannibal was last night. He can’t help but feel fond, despite all the rest.

Hannibal interrupts his tenderness by grabbing his wrists and pinning them on either side of Will’s head. Will gasps in a pained breath when Hannibal presses down on his sprained wrist, and then grinds it harder into the sheets on purpose, hurting even worse than when Jonas fought him.

“Sadist,” Will says through his teeth.

“Pain is impressionable and altering,” Hannibal says, pulling his hips away from Will’s just as he seeks friction. “With time, it changes our chemical makeup and it forms new, bone-deep associations with those who inflict it. Your body will fight back by flooding you with new pleasures and emotions, getting so wrapped up with the pain that the boundary between each blurs.”

“You can just say it turns you on to see me hurting,” Will snarks back.

Hannibal presses his weight down on his wrists hard enough that Will lets out a sob, stretching out his twitching fingers.

“*Extremis.* We come close to death in pleasure, too. There are more extreme emotions that can heighten sex.” Hannibal gets up in his face, smiling cruelly. “Don’t think I haven’t noticed how you act after your therapy with Bedelia. You fuck better when you’re angry and jealous, case in point,” he says.

Will growls, struggling against his grip. “Let me up. Let me on top.”

Hannibal smiles at him struggling, and Will kicks up his knee hard enough that he gets the back of Hannibal’s leg and can push him off balance. Hannibal goes easy enough when Will gets the leverage, rolling on top and fighting his restraining hands off.

“It turns you on too. You feel like you can never get enough but you know I’ll give you everything,” Hannibal says.

Will slaps him. It’s instinctive and thoughtless and he doesn’t realize he’s really done it until the sound reverberates through the room and Hannibal’s face is snapped to the side, slightly open-mouthed in surprise.

Will curls his hand into a fist, considering. He beat one man to death today. He wanted it to be *this* monster. He could make that dream come true, but then Hannibal turns back and smiles admiringly at him.

He reaches for the bedside drawer instead. He's not surprised to find lube and condoms there, and Hannibal goes pliant when he wants him to. He wastes no time in scrambling to pour some lube onto his hand and crawling between Hannibal's legs. He reaches down and pushes one finger inside, holding him down across his throat with his forearm so as not to hurt his wrist as much. There's no way he's not going to make his injury worse today though, he can feel it, and he doesn't care.

Once Hannibal relaxes around his finger, he pulls out and slicks himself up. He pushes Hannibal's legs up to his chest and lines up, forcing himself inside Hannibal where he's still tight. It brings an overwhelming sense of relief, as if he's been deprived of this for years. This place where he fits so perfectly, where he belongs.

After taking a second to get his bearings, he starts to move. He fucks Hannibal into the mattress, pulling back enough to watch himself moving in and out of him. He jerks his hips hard and fast until his eyes are blurring with his own sweat. He can barely see anything but he swears he can feel the antlers that he clutches onto to push Hannibal into the sheets rather than the rough grip on his hair. He overpowers Hannibal this way, catching sight of his smile and his winces and listening to all the incidental noises croaking out of him as Will tries his hardest to ruin him. It's a wholly satisfying replacement for his fantasized murder, subjecting violence in a way that fulfils all of their pleasures, moving as one even as he beats Hannibal down. It feels like their first time, when Hannibal riled him up so much that Will couldn't help himself.

His hips stutter with his force, straining his knees and his hips, and he feels almost feral with his sudden abandon. It doesn't matter that it's not consistent, because his pounding into Hannibal nearly matches the burning in his chest.

He slaps Hannibal again when he looks too calm beneath Will. He uses real strength and Hannibal's cheek burns bright red and hot. This man put his life in danger, he *traumatized* him, but Hannibal just blinks up at him with blown-out pupils and unfailing admiration and gets a frantic hand on himself until he's coming between them, pulsing around Will.

Will's orgasm builds to a painful level and he releases deep inside Hannibal, trembling all over with the tension held in his limbs. He snaps his hips until they are devoid of power and then he flops down before rolling to the side to try to catch his breath.

They breathe heavily next to each other, the clarity and norms of polite society creeping back in as he considers what they've done and how much his desires have changed. Hannibal might say he's only just discovered what he's already wanted. He doesn't feel that ashamed, to his surprise. This feels too good to feel bad about.

He closes his suddenly heavy eyes to bask in the feeling of it.

"Save your energy now while you can," Hannibal says breathlessly, rolling right over top of him to leave the bed. "I plan to fuck you for the rest of the day."

"Hah," Will says dryly, but Hannibal doesn't sound like he's joking and Will feels suddenly aroused again at the thought.

Hannibal walks away and Will takes his advice and stretches out on the bed. He should know by now not to doubt Hannibal.

His stomach growls barely a minute before Hannibal brings him a sandwich in bed to eat, and when every crumb is gone between them, they move to the shower.

It's all happening so fast, and Will can't even think to stop it and demand his rest after the eventful morning. He doesn't *want* to, filled with this energy and euphoria. It's nice to go under the stream of the water and rinse off his sweat and cum and remnants of dried blood, but Hannibal doesn't grab any products to clean him, just pushes him against the cold tile and pushes a finger inside of him. He kisses him open-mouthed and deeply, tongue sliding across the metallic cut from the needle and Will moans, sensitive but undoubtedly ready for round two already.

Hannibal drags him out before he can come again so soon and manhandles him back to bed, pressing him down damp and face first, and heads tongue first between Will's cheeks.

Will bites the sheets instead of letting out the instinctive and embarrassed protest in his throat. He clenches his jaw in an attempt not to tense his whole body at the new sensation. Hannibal licks him with a flat tongue while breathing in through his nose and it's unbearably

intimate to think of him smelling Will's musk and being so close to this sensitive part, as far as they've progressed in their sex life.

The more he does it, though, licking and penetrating and sucking the sensitive flesh, the more he starts to notice the new sensations he's never felt before. Will lets go of the sheet with his teeth and presses his face down to muffle the moans of pleasure he can't quite hold back. It feels so different and it's so *good*. Hannibal nails dig into Will's ass where they hold him apart and Will feels flayed apart, ready to let Hannibal do whatever the hell he wants to.

Will goes soft and then hard again but the pleasure keeps on riding over him in wave after wave. Hannibal only stops to put Will into a new position, getting in deeper and faster and brushing his prostate, and Will doesn't know what he will do without this, this confirmation that things can feel so inhumanly good between them.

He sneaks one hand down under his stomach and squeezes himself, trying to keep himself on that edge of pleasure for as long as he can. It doesn't feel like it should be possible to feel so good so continuously but Hannibal manages it with every new thing he does with his mouth.

Will eventually can't hold back from coming and trembles against the sheets as he rides his peak. When he sinks down and ruts lazily through his aftershocks, Hannibal lifts up on his knees and walks forward until he's straddled over the back of Will's thighs and lining up.

He could ask for a break but something makes him stay still as he feels the burning stretch of Hannibal entering him. He knows from the start that it's Hannibal chasing his own pleasure, but Will swears his cock twitches with the threat of getting hard again. He doesn't even have to get hard to like this, he thinks. He's addicted to the simple movement of sex between them, and of being so close and entangled.

The scent of them grows and intermingles the more sweaty they become, growing musky and bitter where they press their faces against each other, and Will is starting to understand Hannibal's obsession with his smell. It's irresistible; he'd like to live in these pheromones they're trapped in, as pungent as they may be. Hannibal doesn't hide the way he breathes Will in on each inhale like Will is his drug of choice.

This has to be Hannibal without bounds, he thinks, desperate and unstoppable. Hannibal barely seems at threat of losing energy, but when he slows even the slightest amount, Will

pushes him to the side and crawls on top of him.

Grabbing Hannibal below him, he spreads his legs and sinks down. Hannibal sits up and grabs either side of his ribs, pressing their torsos together as Will starts moving and pleasuring Hannibal below him.

He rides him until his thighs burn. He presses a finger into Hannibal in their clumsy position and tries to imagine them feeling the same pleasure, feeling each other's pleasure, adding it to theirs to multiply each sensation in perpetuity. *This* is what he should have been using his empathy disorder for, he thinks with amusement.

Hannibal bites him particularly hard on his rib, making Will jolt. Will tries to speak, though it comes out whispered because of how out of breath he is.

“You like to hurt me…” he pants. “You like to bring me close to death.”

Hannibal licks the bite he made in response. Will wonders if he’s imagining the blood spilling there. He keeps bouncing his hips, trying to hold onto his momentum.

“Do you ever think about killing me?” Will asks. It doesn’t feel allowed to say, but it’s out in the air now anyway.

He sees Hannibal’s head rise up to look at him, but Will doesn’t meet his gaze.

“Do you think… about eating me?” Will asks. He holds back a smile. Hannibal won’t like his faux-oblivious crudeness, but he will tell the truth to set Will straight.

Hannibal’s hands tighten on him, nails digging in painfully.

“I think… about elevating you,” Hannibal says. “Making you beautiful. A suffered martyr, hung like a saint, me kissing your feet. I think about your taste, about the texture, the burst of

juice and flavour. I think about you raw, all flesh and blood. But more than all of that, I think about you with me. I think about you killing. I think about seeing you drenched in the blood of thousands, navigating the battlefield of our world. Most of all, I think about the art you would create, your design. I already cannot entirely predict you and the fantasy of you killing in my mind is obscured without this knowing. All I know is that to see you become would be one of the most beautiful things of my existence."

It's too much, it's too vile, it's too appealing, and Will is hard again from just hearing the dream in Hannibal's low voice. He focuses on riding him, long past the point of having any shame left to give.

Panting, Will says, "Ah, so that's what you've been doing?"

Hannibal tilts his head.

"I know you set me up with Jonas. You sent me into a trap. Are you gonna say you knew I would be fine?"

"I can never know that, but perhaps if you had died then you wouldn't have been worth the rest."

Will laughs incredulously, shaking his head, and rides Hannibal harder. That stings, and it's shameful that it stings and that he's grateful he was worthy enough to survive for Hannibal.

"You crossed too many boundaries, Hannibal. You're not going to get away with that like it was fine."

Hannibal just smiles up at him.

The entire afternoon passes much like that, moaning with abandon and grabbing and biting and scratching, writhing around like animals in heat. It's different, it feels like a fight, and it still doesn't feel equal but Will's on a similar playing field now. This is the most it's felt like they're truly moving together, working as a partnership to eke out all the pleasure they can. They've already learned each other's bodies with such precision.

One thing he's certain of is that they'll both surely be covered in marks for days after, biting and scratching like they're trying to dig new holes in each other. It's both addictive and freeing and Will loses track of the rounds and where they start and end, how they orient their bodies and push each other into positions. He can't stop thinking about eternity together, on that battlefield that Hannibal speaks of, living at the fringes of society where they're truly separate from the rest.

He thinks that when they do stop, it's more out of failing muscles than anything else, or at least that's how he feels, as his trembling limbs stop working quite how they're used to, both flopped over sideways and spooning and Hannibal still grinding his half-hardness into him when they fall apart. Will's body is begging to sink into the sweaty mattress, stripped of all sheets from their kicking. Their skin is glued together with tacky, drying sweat and other fluids. Everything feels achy and agonizing and he tastes the metallic of blood from what he's sure is many sources.

"Rest, darling," Hannibal says through his rough throat and quick breaths. "Rest, and we will eat, and we will gain energy and we'll do this all again all night."

Will laughs silently into the air, chest shaking Hannibal's arm. "You're insane," he whispers, and then gulps back when he tries to push down all his glee and fondness.

"It's all I can do to handle how I feel about you. Let me have you, over and over again," Hannibal whispers into his neck, breathing into his nose when he finishes talking. Will can tell even Hannibal is dumb with exhaustion, voice slurring and uncharacteristically inarticulate.

Will digs his nails into Hannibal's arm and knows, without a doubt and with a stunning amount of clarity in his haze, that he won't be able to leave Hannibal behind and find a moment's peace without wanting him forever. The inevitability is bone-deep, and as great as the feeling that he will probably kill again if it means they'll get this close to each other and blur into oneness.

He moves closer into Hannibal’s sweaty arms. Maybe it was always going to be this way.

Chapter 27

With his head pressed sideways into his pillow, Will watches through fluttering lashes as the sunrise changes the sky from sparkling darkness to a dull light gray to a vibrant swirl of wispy clouds. Hannibal moves in and out of him, a heavy and rhythmic dead-weight on Will's back that leaves him nowhere to move with pillows under his hips to prop him up. He holds onto the headboard as if for dear life. It feels like it's all his life depends on, this one tether to really merging with Hannibal, skin and bone melting into each other.

They barely got to dinner last night, shockingly uncharacteristic for Hannibal, but their appetites have been stuck on each other. They napped until it was dark and then fucked through the night, skin all sore and friction-burned but not mattering at all. Will wonders if it's possible that he's bruised on every inch of his body. That each step he takes he'll remember the throb of Hannibal through each burst blood vessels.

He thinks he's far past the point of coming again, though he's thought that a few times already. It still feels good somehow. It feels like it's gone on for an endless amount of time in some blurry, alternating space between waking dreams and terrifying clarity and Will can barely believe that his own pleasure is this good, that it's even possible to feel this turned on.

Hannibal still finishes in him somehow, finally, shaking and biting with it, teeth digging in over top of another bite mark on his neck that makes Will whimper weakly.

They lay quietly for a while, Hannibal still draped suffocating across him and soft within him, their exhaustion secondary to sitting in their shared pleasure.

Finally, Will gulps back the spit in his mouth and speaks past his sore, dehydrated throat.

"We need to take the body today."

Hannibal nods against him.

“That means leaving the bed at some point.”

Hannibal sighs, inflating and deflating his chest dramatically. “If we must.”

“We need to get back to Abigail too. I gotta call her.”

“We? Have you made up your mind?”

“I’m ready to change it at any time, so watch it,” Will says, though he’s uncertain that he could.

Hannibal kisses him up the side of his face, pressing close and hurting Will’s lungs with the pressure. Will groans his protest and tries to squirm free, without success, and resorts to pushing at Hannibal until he finally stands up and off of him.

Will limps across the room to start the shower. He was uncertain he would be able to walk, and it’s really a close one. The come filling him up inside drips down the back of his leg and it feels obscene and entirely fitting.

Hannibal crowds into the shower behind him and pulls him into a sweet embrace, much gentler than he’s been all night. He cleans Will inch by inch with care and an adoring, happy smile on his face.

Will stands still with his arms dropped and aimless, held captive by his own feelings. It’s going to come out. He can’t help it.

“I love you,” he mutters to the top of Hannibal’s head as he cleans his lower half. Hannibal straightens up abruptly, nearly knocking their heads together. He blinks against the water.

Will doesn’t say it again. Hannibal heard his mournful admission. He lets Hannibal take his time stroking a hand down Will’s cheek, staring on in admiration and a bit of shock, and then

he kisses Will lightly, stopping an inch away from Will to repeat:

"And I love you, Will. So dearly and like I almost never thought I would with another person. I am entirely enraptured, and unsure what to do about it half the time. But I am yours, so take me with you where you go."

Will nods. It seems like the time to make a heartfelt admission right back, but he has no other words than those three simple ones. Perhaps when he's feeling less resentful of his own emotions he will be able to tell Hannibal more.

It might also be easier when he can truly believe Hannibal when he says he loves Will. Perhaps it is a kind of love, but is it the selfless and all-consuming love that Will craves? Charming words are one thing, true loyalty is hard to come by.

Hannibal doesn't push, just cleans him tenderly and kisses him even more.

Will thinks about Hannibal's sister again and the rapture that Hannibal spoke of his love for her with. Does he love Will the most out of anyone since her? It feels wrong to wish for more. He would never try to compete with Mischa, but can't help but want to covet heaven and hell and Hannibal's love all for himself.

Hannibal guides Will out of the shower and wraps him up in a soft towel.

"I'm going to make breakfast. Come down when you're ready," Hannibal says, grabbing a robe hanging up and covering himself. Will looks down first and catches sight of the bruises and bite marks and raised scratch marks he left covering Hannibal's body.

When Hannibal leaves, he wipes away the fog on the mirror and then drops his own towel to examine the discoloration on himself. It's even worse than Hannibal looked. He's not sure what's from his fight with Jonas and what's from Hannibal being too rough with him.

It's been a long twenty-four hours of violence and he feels pleasantly sated from its effects, not how he thinks he should be feeling. He pokes at some of the darker patches and turns and lifts up on his toes to see his backside, which is barely even the color of his skin anymore. Maybe he does have a bit of a masochistic streak.

He finds his phone, staring worryingly at the battery percentage. He calls Abigail and promises *soon, so soon.* She sounds impatient but resigned and he will take it. He tries not to feel guilty about spending the night with Hannibal like that. If he's bringing him along, he might have even more to feel guilty for soon.

Time is ticking for Alana, but Will already knows deep in his bones that *he's* not going to be the one to beg for her mercy. It doesn't matter as much to him, he has to admit. This is not his fight, but he wants to see Hannibal step down for someone else.

He finally gets dressed, wincing through each movement, and meets Hannibal downstairs where he's already plating breakfast.

"Sore?" Hannibal asks.

"As if you don't know," Will says, lowering himself into the kitchen chair with a supporting hand on the back of it.

"Are you sure you are adequate to travel?"

Will nods. "Let's not put it off. I'd rather not deal with a body that's already rotted."

"Do you feel obliged?"

"What?"

Hannibal sets down their food and Will picks up his fork with the hand that's *not* throbbing. "If you are considering putting it off, perhaps you feel like you must do it."

"As opposed to jumping at the opportunity?" Will says bitterly.

The silence that follows is uncomfortable. It reminds Will that he is still not sure how they will match up in this world.

"Perhaps just the satisfaction of finishing what you started," Hannibal says, something dark and anticipatory in his eyes. This is a test, Will realizes. It all probably is, and always has been.

"I want to do it, alright? I want to do something with him. It would give me closure."

"Closure through reciprocity. Will it make you feel even?"

Will reckons that Hannibal has guessed that Will wants the cliff to throw Jonas over it.

"He didn't manage to throw me out that window."

"Not all of you, perhaps."

Will glares at him. "I'm doing more. Let's say it's payback for all the other people he killed."

"Payback that none of the victim's loved ones will be privy to enjoying with you."

"What do you want from me?" Will snaps. "Can you at least stop the obfuscation now that the cat's out of the bag?"

Hannibal looks displeased as he chews his food.

“I want you to let go of the moral shield you will be tempted to keep. You will find no happiness trying to keep one foot in your past world.”

Will shakes his head. “Unbelievable,” he mutters.

“Excuse me?”

“You’re never going to shut up about it now, are you?” Will complains.

Hannibal looks so taken aback that Will can’t help but chuckle at him.

“Maybe I’ll surprise you, hm? Hell, you make me want to run back to the FBI just to spite you.”

Will stands up and feels Hannibal’s eyes tracking him. He pours some coffee into a travel mug.

“You do surprise me,” Hannibal says.

“Y’know, before I thought you were one of the only people in the world that didn’t underestimate me,” Will says. “You said it yourself one of the first times we talked, that as much as people used my skills, no one could get past my perceived fragility. You didn’t treat me as fragile, even though you probably saw the *worst* of my instability.”

“Your sensitivity to the world is what gave you your unmatched strength,” Hannibal says, speaking so simply it’s like it should be obvious.

Will tilts his head back and forth, considering. “Handicap, advantage, it could be anything, but I’ve still made it through.”

“Of course it is more than just your empathy. You have honed your intelligence and resilience over the years, as you have needed to to survive.”

Will shrugs, turning back to lean against the counter. “Not really my point to say I’m objectively strong enough. It still doesn’t feel good to be doubted.”

Hannibal tilts his head down slightly. “My apologies.”

Will continues on despite finally getting an apology out of Hannibal, which he’s sure is a rare feat. It’s probably at least partially meant to sate him, which makes Will want to make things more difficult.

“I’m not ignorant to who I am, or to the urges I’ve had. I’ve always known who I *could* be. Maybe it doesn’t seem like it to you, but there’s some beauty in choosing to be kind and good in this world too.” Will turns to grab some sugar and then continues mumbling, half to himself. “And then sometimes I grapple with the fact that I don’t really give a shit about most people and they don’t give a shit about me. Indulgence seems much better sometimes, but we don’t all live our lives driven by hedonism like you do.”

“I’d like you to focus on your pleasure. All that you have ever wanted.”

“We’ll see where this goes. First things first, you need to stop dwelling on whatever image you have of me and let things progress as they do. I shouldn’t have to drag you to fucking couples counselling 101 to tell you that relationships need *compromise*.”

“I’m not sure how Doctor du Maurier would feel about that appointment.”

“Mention her again and I might kill you,” Will says, pointing at Hannibal over the counter.

Hannibal smiles fondly and pushes himself up out of his chair. He crowds Will in the kitchen and kisses him, wrapping his arms around Will’s shoulders. He presses in with growing passion and Will pulls back enough to shake his head.

“Nuh-uh, we’re going now.”

He twists out of Hannibal’s wandering grip before his hands can reach his hips and get them both distracted again. It takes a great deal of effort to focus on just packing the car and getting out in good timing, but soon enough they’re on the road with Will behind the wheel, Hannibal fiddling with some classical music tapes, and a dead guy in the trunk.

It takes them all day and then some to make it to the cliffside house that Hannibal spoke of. The cliff really is no joke, not too far off from the height of a skyscraper, and apparently eroding closer and closer to the property. Will can only imagine the magnificence of the waves crashing high enough up the bedrock to mist the place they stand.

It’s a beautiful house that Will assumes Hannibal bought long before meeting Will. It’s more suited to his tastes in its rich and eccentric modernity.

Despite their exhaustion from all the driving and bone deep soreness from the previous night, they immediately back onto the cliff edge and pull Jonas’ corpse out of the trunk.

He’s pungent and soiled with pale sunken skin. He barely looks like himself. They unravel him from the tarp and both lift a side of him so it’s as though he’s standing on his own and looking out upon the sea.

Will finds himself stopping to gaze at it too. It takes his breath away, both out of beauty and out of a sudden panic of how it would feel to drop from such a height.

“Any last words?” Hannibal asks.

He shakes his head. “He was just a bitter man,” Will says.

They shimmy forward and then push his dead weight off of the edge. He spins in the air, barrelling toward the bottom and then hits the water with a splash that they can’t even hear. Within seconds the ripple his body created is obscured by the crashing waves, swallowed up by the dark ocean.

Will gasps at the drop he feels in his stomach, as if it was him who fell those 50-odd-feet. Hannibal grabs him by the shoulders to steady him and then leads them away from the dangerous edge. There’s nothing more to see, Jonas’ existence thrown away like it doesn’t matter one bit.

He doesn’t feel the need to say it all outloud to Hannibal how he sympathizes and understands Jonas so well now. This feels like throwing away another part of him. What’s left is still more morally-questionable than he’s ever been before.

Hannibal guides him inside and immediately starts cooking. Perhaps Will should have offered up a piece of Jonas for him. He questions how he would really feel about that fact and finds he mostly just cares about not giving in to Hannibal too fast. He would abuse the privilege.

“Just how many secret properties do you own?” Will asks, taking a seat.

“A few, in select strategic locations. Places I have lived or expected to.”

“I can only imagine all the nefarious purposes you have places for.”

Hannibal gives him a side smirk from where he’s chopping vegetables.

“The states isn’t the only place you’ve terrorized, is it?” Will asks.

“There are stories I’d rather show than tell you, if you give me the chance.”

Will doesn’t push him. His heart beats a little faster at the thought of seeing that side of Hannibal. He’s seen the outcome of his murders, but not the *process* of his art. Or a great deal of his past. Suddenly all of the stories of Hannibal in Florence and attending medical school have a different light knowing what Hannibal’s real passions were. Learning anatomy and applying it to the slaughter of his peers.

Hannibal eventually sits down and they begin to eat together where they can watch the moon out the tall windows.

Will can see the stars now but he questions their existence. They all could have died out already and it would take a lot longer to notice the lights gone from this far away.

“Alana isn’t in the basement here, is she?” Will asks.

“No.” Hannibal pauses with his fork halfway through his mouth. “Miriam Lass is here.”

Will’s head shoots up. His lips twitch, half-ready to chuckle at the shocking joke, before his face falls.

“You’re not kidding, are you? Dead or alive?”

“Alive. Downstairs.”

“And for, what, three years? Her arm—you played with Jack all those times.”

“It was the easiest way to maintain my name.”

Will scoffs. “Your *pride*. And why have you kept her instead of eating her?”

“She figured it out, caught me. I can respect that perceptiveness, even if I cannot allow it to spread. Besides, it may come in handy to keep a high-profile victim on hand. She is close to Jack’s heart.”

“Ten steps ahead even without knowing what the future holds. I do wonder what other insurance you keep handy. Imagine if I caught you too early.”

“I had imagined you would, at times.”

Will shrugs. “I could have. If I’d wanted to. Deep inside, if I’d been willing to accept that you weren’t the comfort I was drawn to.”

“I can still be your comfort. I would like to be, so long as you understand I will not let you hide away, a process that can undoubtedly be uncomfortable.”

“My comfort and my stressor I need comfort from.”

Hannibal sips his wine. “Your partner.”

Will looks down. “What will you do with Miriam Lass now?”

“Had I left with Dr. du Maurier, I knew I would have had to pull the plug rather than take her. Now I wonder if Jack doesn’t deserve her back. To truly understand that he lost you, it may give him more perspective to see the other one he failed.”

Will sighs. “He didn’t fail me. He actually believed me. I just don’t know if he ever had me in the first place.”

“A trade then, because it will break his heart all the same.”

“If you can keep me, you mean.”

Will halts mid-chew when Hannibal suddenly grabs his face below the jaw from across the table, squeezing at his throat and pulling him up to look him in the eye.

“You will have to fight to lose me. Why don’t you convince me that you don’t truly want it, hm?”

Will holds his gaze, clenching his teeth until Hannibal lets him go. He jerks his head back.

“You were quick to leave me before.” The bitterness slithers up his throat like bile. No matter what excuse he had, the panic or the uncertainty, Hannibal still let Will leave without him. He went to Bedelia’s place and Will doesn’t know if he can truly forgive that intention. Not when he had to ask Hannibal to change his mind. He still hasn’t offered up Alana’s safety either, still waiting for someone to *ask.*

“It was not how I wanted things to go.”

“But it didn’t take much for it to get to that place.”

“I thought I knew when to cut my losses.”

“Hah!” Will snorts self-deprecatingly and puts a hand over his chest. “Ouch, that hopeless? Me practically begging you to come with me?”

Hannibal raises his eyebrows. “I did not see any begging.”

“You have lied to me and betrayed me, why do I still feel like I have to fight to keep you around?”

“Anything worth anything is worth fighting for. Do you think I have not fought?”

“I think you’ve fought to protect your own interests *greatly*.” Will sits back, hovering his fork over his plate. He’s not all that hungry now.

“Then you have not been paying attention to how I have been trying to prepare you to see me all this time. All so I didn’t lose you.”

“Maybe we have different definitions of love. I’ve never tried to change you.”

“No? Then how do you explain all those times you tried to see if I would fit into your world. I did, didn’t I? This is me trying to help you fit into mine.”

Will smiles bitterly at him. “The opera couldn’t be enough?” he says sarcastically.

“You hide behind humor when you’re feeling emotional, you know? That’s one of your pathologies.”

“Oh, are we telling each other our pathologies now?”

“I think it’s time we go get some rest. Sleep here.”

“No. We’re heading straight to Abigail.” Will stands up with his half-empty dinner plate.

He would love to stay the night in this beautiful house and thinks he could stare off that beautiful cliff edge forever, but he’s promised Abigail too many things.

“In that case, perhaps we’ll have time for one more stop on the way.”

Will reckons that means Hannibal is clearing out his basement here. Hannibal doesn’t ask for help and Will doesn’t offer it. He washes all of their dishes and then sits in the passenger seat to wait. He dozes off and jolts up when Hannibal climbs in the driver's seat.

“Sleep, Will. Our journey continues.”

They double back the way they came. Will sleeps restlessly against the car window, wishing they could stop somewhere and look up the news. He needs to know if Jack even survived and what things look for the three of them now. Could Abigail be in any danger, did he forget anything?

He’s almost forgotten that Hannibal put his mind to something else when they pull up to a building in rural Virginia. Hannibal grabs Miriam Lass from the trunk and carries her bridal style into the building. She’s pale, clean, and one-armed. Will watches curiously but does not follow.

Afterward, they pull up to a grocery store. Hannibal goes down the aisles quickly and Will trails behind. They both know there are cameras here, and it’s close enough to the building that someone will probably find it. Not only has Hannibal exposed himself, but he’s exposed Will, albeit confusing their morals because of Miriam Lass still being alive. People will talk.

Will imagines he’s going to need a different identity soon. It’s not like he’s ever been that attached to his own. He leans back and tries to sleep some more so he doesn’t have to think about it.

Chapter 28

Chapter Notes

one final chapter and a short epilogue, enjoy!!

They pull up to Abigail's in the morning and nothing seems to be amiss. Will opens the door to a crowd of excitable dogs, thankfully all accounted for, even Winston and Lucky. They run up to Hannibal and it seems that nothing has reduced *their* love for him.

Inside, Abigail stands in the center of the room with her arms crossed. She's wearing one of Will's plaid shirts with the front tails tucked into her shorts. Right. He needs to get her new clothes too. Thankfully Hannibal made that stop at a grocery store before coming here so he won't deprive her of other basic needs anymore.

Abigail's eyes flick over Will's shoulders and for a moment she looks more scared than angry as Hannibal steps inside. And then the anger returns.

"Did you find her?" she asks Will.

It's the moment he knew would come, a moment he could have made easier if he pushed Hannibal to give up Alana's location before. But if Hannibal's going to test him, then Will's going to test him back.

Hannibal's care of Abigail still matters, and Will wants to know if he will forgive her influence just as he would have forgiven Mischa's.

"Actually, I want you to ask him." He steps out of the way and Hannibal looks a bit surprised, but does step forward to acknowledge Abigail.

“Well?” she asks with a nervous shrug of her shoulders.

“What do you wish to know?” he asks.

“Why did you do it?” she demands.

“Alana Bloom was growing suspicious of us and I had to protect—”

Abigail scoffs, loudly.

“I admit that it was perhaps rash,” Hannibal says. “I wish I could make you understand.”

“I hate you. I really do.”

She goes to leave and Will steps out of her way, shooting a look at Hannibal across the room. Hannibal meets his eyes with a pleading gaze.

“And where will you go, if not with me?” Hannibal calls to her.

Abigail freezes in her tracks and Will thinks it must be more about the sudden emotion in Hannibal’s voice.

“Is there a future where your little childhood fantasy comes true, or have you always been aware of what you’ve been drawn to? Is it a coincidence that you repeatedly came back to me? Crawled into my basement window, called me for help, ate at my table?”

“I didn’t have many options.”

“Oh, Abigail, Alana is a lovely woman, but how well do you know her? Perhaps she’s as comforting as your mother, as smart as you, and tied up with enough killers that she might be able to understand you, but you also have no one else.”

“Do you think I don’t know you’re manipulating me?” Abigail asks.

Hannibal smiles warmly. “Of course, you’re so used to manipulating others yourself that you have to notice it in others. It’s quite a skill.”

“So what, you’re gonna say I’m just manipulating you so I can’t ask for anything at all?”

“Abigail. Ask me.”

She pouts at him, furrowing up her eyebrows with emotion.

“If you cared about me, you wouldn’t hurt me like that,” she says. “Let her go, and let her stay alive.”

He nods. “Give me your phone.”

Abigail digs into her pocket and passes over her disposable phone. Hannibal dials a number, one longer than 911.

After a few moments, Hannibal says, “Jack, hello. I am glad to hear you are well enough to talk. Don’t bother trying to track this number, I’ll be gone soon enough and you won’t hear the information you want to hear. Are you well enough to remember an address?”

A pause.

“Good.” He rattles off an address that Will gathers must be the building they stopped at in Virginia. Alana was there too?

“I hope when you see your two understudies, safe yet lacking in certain areas, you will consider who you send after me in the future. You always know how to pick them, don’t you?”

Hannibal pauses again and Will can only imagine the vitriol and threats on the other end.

“I wish you a good recovery. Will sends his regards.”

Hannibal hangs up the phone and hands it back to Abigail. She holds it close to herself, cradled in two hands.

“Now that that’s dealt with, who wants breakfast?”

Hannibal heads back to the car with an annoying pep in his step. Will feels like he needs a week-long nap after that marathon road trip and he’s sure Abigail is feeling emotionally drained from this single conversation.

He looks at Abigail across the room, trying to ask how she is with just his expression.

“That was easier than I expected,” she murmurs.

“I think he’s trying,” Will says, but internally he’s thinking that Hannibal doesn’t have much to lose. He already decided to give Miriam back, maybe he wants to give Alana back too. He didn’t seem to want to *kill* Alana much, only hurt and traumatize her, which he already accomplished.

It might even be a kick to have Will and Abigail ask him for things. Ask for a small favor from the devil and you owe him your whole soul back. Will they ever be able to push him off

his own path?

For the time being, at least, it seems no one will be able to stop Hannibal from cooking up a breakfast feast in the barely-functioning cabin kitchen. He carries the grocery bags past them in one trip and begins lining ingredients up in what little space there is. Perhaps Hannibal is a stress cooker. The thought is amusing.

Will lays down in the bed and tries to stretch his back until it pops. He doesn't stir until Hannibal calls him to the table, which he's moved by an open window and decorated with some fresh flowers from who knows where on the ledge. Always going the extra mile, and the food is no exception. Abigail sits down next to Will.

It feels different eating together now. They're not on an awkward visit that will end in a couple of hours, they're suddenly and indefinitely on the outskirts of society together, on the run like Bonnie and Clyde, featuring their secret adopted teenager. It's a kind of commitment that suggests they belong to each other as *family.* And it's not the kind of family that Will expected.

Is it the kind of family that they need?

It's the closest he's felt to being safe in a while now, though it may take a lot more to trust that Hannibal is staying with him for good. They are quiet as they eat and he knows it will take a lot of work to get through their recent grievances.

Hannibal clears the table after they're done eating but tells them to stay sitting as he retrieves something from his bag. Abigail looks at Will for direction but he has no clue what is happening.

Hannibal returns with a folder and pulls out papers and passports, laying them out in three piles.

"We are now the Corvos family, an Italian surname deriving from the Latin *corvus* meaning crow, a species that stays with its communal group for life, expressing a deep protective

instinct for each other," Hannibal explains. Will opens his passport to see his own face and his new name. William Corvos.

"And crows together are called a murder of crows. Hilarious," Will says dryly.

Hannibal leans over him, practically batting his eyes. "I have an Italian background *mio caro*, and you took my last name when we married."

Will gulps and pulls the marriage license from the bottom of the pile. It's an appealing thought, he can't deny it. However, this is nothing more than a piece of paper, so easy for Hannibal to fake. This is no commitment or tied knot. This is a play of house for airport security.

"After which we adopted our daughter," Hannibal says.

"Great. It's official," Abigail grumbles, looking at her papers and tilting her head at her passport. "You couldn't have given me the chance to take a better photo?"

Hannibal ignores her. "I moved to America as I worked on my research, where I met Will and where we found you in foster care having lost both of your parents in a car crash."

"And now we are moving back to Italy," Will breathes. Hannibal wanted Abigail to go to school in Florence.

"Any objections?" Hannibal asks.

Will stays quiet. He doesn't have any other ideas aside from this cabin and while it might support a life for Will, it's no life for Abigail.

However, it is tempting to dissent if only to challenge Hannibal's tendency to control everything.

“It will work for now,” Will says.

“Good.” Hannibal begins to gather up the papers.

“But I’m not living with you,” Will says.

Hannibal straightens up. “Excuse me?”

“Downtown Florence is no place for my dogs, or me, for that matter.”

“Are you so certain?”

“Yes, I am. Maybe we can work up to living together when there’s a bit more trust in the relationship.”

Hannibal watches him quietly. Abigail shifts uncomfortably in her seat.

“Hopefully you’ll allow me a loan to get my place in a rural area nearby. You know I don’t like asking for money but, well, it’s your fault that I need it now isn’t it?” Will asks sarcastically.

Hannibal nods stiffly.

On afterthought, Will also wants to have a place for Abigail to escape living with Hannibal. He hopes he can find a place in a reasonable distance that isn’t too close to feel suffocated by Hannibal’s presence. He needs to set boundaries.

“Well, *dads,* I’m going back to bed,” Abigail says with a clipped tone. “Your dogs wake me up way too fucking early.”

She walks away and Hannibal doesn’t even call her out for her language, which probably means he’s very upset. An upset Hannibal isn’t a good thing.

Will tries to meet his eyes, without success, so he stands up.

“Up. We’re going on a walk,” he says, then leaves to get ready before Hannibal can resist.

They walk down the thin dirt paths that have probably been cleared by deer, twisting into thick woods that give the impression that they’re already lost. They don’t talk, instead Will keeps his mouth shut to avoid eating any of the spider webs they break through. The bushes on either side of them are coloured with various berries that Will has never tried to eat for fear that they’re poisonous, and he can hear the scuttling of animals that haven’t been disturbed for a long while here. The air is still crisp with the cold morning air but the sun warms them through the trees.

Will guesses the direction they need to go. The woods look strange and unfamiliar with new growth and weathering, not like when he was here with his father as a teenager and knew every inch of these woods. Still small and blooming late, he found more peace here with his dad than with anyone else he knew. The memories feel distant and surreal now that he has no one to look back on them with.

If he denied Hannibal now, he wonders if these memories would become distant and surreal too, or if his inability to stop thinking about Hannibal would leave them forever vivid in his mind.

Eventually they come across the lake and the rickety dock that Will remembers. It looks too rotted to stand on so they linger by the shore. Will tosses a stick into the water and Winston, Harley, and Buster go after it while the other dogs bark. Harley ultimately wins, which he expects Winston let happen, and he returns with the stick for Will to lob back into the water.

“Did you think I’d leave my dogs?” Will asks, wiping his hands of the wet dirt.

“I would prefer it.”

Will grimaces, looking away. He wonders how much of the last few weeks were a lie to draw him in. Hannibal leans in and touches his arm to bring his attention back.

As if reading his mind, he says, “I don’t dislike your dogs, and have grown rather fond of them. It is that your dogs are a crutch, as I’m sure you’re aware. It’s the same crutch you held onto all the while you forced yourself into the police force, forced yourself into the FBI, like if you just saved enough victims or saved enough strays, you would convince yourself this is who you are. As if the darkness would stop screaming for you so long as you did enough good. Standing on the edge of the violence, on the *right* side, you deprived yourself all this time.”

Will crosses his arms and kicks a rock out of the dirt below them. “They’re still my family. Dogs aren’t disposable.”

“Your only family until me and Abigail came around.”

Will looks him up and down. “A couple more lost strays under my belt.”

Hannibal follows him when Will resumes walking around the perimeter of the lake, wet dogs at their legs.

Hannibal speaks to the back of his head. “If you are sure this is what you want, then I believe the safest way to travel is for me to go to Italy and make our arrangements while you send your dogs a couple at a time from different airlines. Considering Jack will try to track you as well, flying with eight dogs is rather suspicious.”

Will nods. At least Hannibal knows Will is too stubborn to roll over on these matters.

“‘No fly list notice: and make sure to be on the look out for homosexuals with an excessive number of dogs,’” Will mocks dryly.

Hannibal barely smiles at that.

Will walks until he finds a fallen log to sit on and Hannibal takes a seat next to him.

“Will,” he says.

Will turns to look at him, wondering if the worry he sees is genuine.

“Would you ever say to me, ‘Stop. If you loved me, you'd stop.’” he asks.

Will turns away and considers what Hannibal is asking of him.

He remembers Hannibal telling him that he would have forgiven Mischa her influence, perhaps even if she asked him to deny his nature. It stings to think that Hannibal would not forgive the same of Will, but would Hannibal have been able to keep from resenting Mischa?

He’s not sure if this is Hannibal giving him a chance to turn back. It may be his only chance. But if family is about acceptance rather than obedience, what right does he have?

Will considers for only a moment before shaking his head. He can’t even imagine asking such a thing. He never has. He might fight what Hannibal expects of him until the day he dies, but he understands Hannibal too well to ever ask him something so cruel and unfair. It would only alienate them. Thinking now, he knows that Hannibal never would have been the man he fell in love with if he wasn’t this *thing* he is: this killer and manipulator that could ruin his life but still against all odds, makes him feel like he belongs. He wants to harbor

every bit of him and his heart beats faster at the thought of seeing those most violent parts behind the curtain. It almost feels like a privilege.

“No. Not in a thousand years.”

Hannibal nods only once in acknowledgment, but his whole body sinks in relief.

“Look,” Will says. “We’ll do what we do now, living in our little worlds and crossing over every once in a while. I’ll come to yours and you’ll come to mind. I’ll eat your meals and you’ll give me patience. We’ll give Abigail her space when she needs it and *listen* to what she wants. We’ll leave Alana and Jack alone as long as they leave us alone. *And* you’ll be honest to me, that’s one thing I need from you, and it shouldn’t be too much to ask.”

“Can I ask for one thing?” Hannibal asks.

“What is it?” “May I choose your new property?”

Will furrows his eyebrows. “That’s all you want?”

“It’s what I believe you would allow me.” “You can choose but I might refuse it if I don’t like it.”

“I will keep you in mind and try to make a home you will be happy in. But I don’t want you too far away.”

“Fair enough. I’ll need help navigating things everywhere until I can learn some of the language anyway.”

“I plan to start you two on intensive lessons today,” Hannibal says.

“*Mamma mia*, maybe just help me to get around and order food,” Will grumbles. “I can be a dumb tourist otherwise.”

“Tourism suggests a temporary visit.”

“I mean, you’re taking me out of the country I’ve lived in my whole life, and have barely even *left* before. We didn’t make this decision together so it doesn’t feel much like I’m making a home.”

“Perhaps it will grow on you.”

“Perhaps,” Will concedes shortly. “Perhaps not.”

Hannibal cups his face with his hand, stroking tenderly while keeping Will trapped with a finger hooked under his jaw. He leans in to kiss Will’s cheek and down his throat, before moving up again to whisper into his ear.

“Just you wait,” he says. “Until I have fed you coratella con carciofi and dined with a vintage Amarone della Valpolicella at sunset.”

“A rather mundane life, eating and lounging about.”

“It will be anything but. Wait until we are walking down the Piazza Della Repubblica or viewing art in Galleria degli Uffizi. Until I have you trapped between the sheets after we have dined on escargot, where I’ve sketched you by the open window where we can see the Cattedrale di Santa Maria del Fiore between light pouring in. Where we are known by no one and free to do what we wish. I will have you for hours, I will share with you everything I’ve known, I will indulge in each experience with you.”

Will squirms in his spot, leaning away. He doesn’t want to give in. He doesn’t want to have these goosebumps climbing up his arms just at Hannibal’s breath in his ear.

“Calm down, we’ll have a teenager next door now,” he whispers, trying to get the conversation back to safer topics.

Hannibal clenches his teeth down around Will’s earlobe, hard enough for Will to let out a half shriek. Despite himself, he leans into Hannibal, clutching above his knee and breathing deeply.

“I *will* have you,” Hannibal repeats and then pushes Will backward off of the log. Will flails momentarily and then thumps breathlessly back on the ground. Some dog noses at his face but then leaves when Hannibal crawls on top of him instead, leaning down in a manner that is both playful and threatening.

Will looks up at him slowly, finally meeting Hannibal in his seriousness, and says, “Hannibal, I don’t give a single fuck where you take me or what you show me.”

“No?” Hannibal asks, smugly, tugging at his collar.

“No. You know I’m in it. I already fell. I’m already *yours*.”

Epilogue

There are perks to being the head of the Behavioral Sciences unit, one being that none of his agents can tell him to get the fuck back into his hospital bed when his long-missing trainee shows up a floor below him. The agents there to question Miriam Lass take a good look at Jack Crawford limping into the doorway and leave without question to give them privacy.

Jack's voice is hoarse and painful when he speaks.

"I had to see you with my own eyes to believe it," he says.

Miriam's eyes lower to the bandage around his neck. "They told me you weren't well enough to see me. I should have known nothing would stop the guru from getting the information he wants," she says. Her voice is light like how she was before, but the strain behind her eyes shows anything but.

He shuffles toward the chair by her bed and follows the line of her shoulder. It stops abruptly at her elbow in a tangle of scar tissue.

She glances down where he's looking. "They've already ordered me a prosthetic arm. They said it shouldn't be too hard to get used to. I could even return to the force."

"You're that eager to return after all that happened?"

Both her and Alana Bloom were almost taken away from him. Will *was*. It doesn't feel like it should be possible to fail his agents that much.

"He's not caught. I know he isn't, I saw him in those last moments," she says with determination.

He lowers himself down into the chair carefully. “What did you see?”

She furrows her eyebrows, staring down at her hospital sheets.

“It was different than every other time. It had always felt like a dream, waking up to the smell of fresh flowers and the sting of a needle, somewhere that pain and fear were so far away. I never saw Hannibal Lecter before this last time. It was always a different man, someone he must have been working with. I finally awoke with some clarity and Lecter was there in front of me. He spoke to me. He said he was returning me to you, and he wanted to send along a message.”

She hesitates.

“What did he say?” Jack pushes, leaning forward.

“He said that even as your wife’s lungs fail and her mind slips away from yours, you should never forget that moment you followed your 'Bella' down the streets of Italy. There is little more important than upholding the potential of a beloved, especially at the time you are closest to losing them, and that there will always be a beauty worthy of your wife in the birthplace of the renaissance. Should you ever wish to visit, you may find your memory refreshed.”

Jack sits silently, his teeth clenched together even as the flex of his jaw pulls on the wound Hannibal made in his neck.

“He’s giving you a path to follow him, isn’t he?” Miriam asks, sitting up a little straighter.

“Yes. He is,” Jack says. “And I imagine it will lead me right to the other agent he took from me.”

End Notes

thank you all so much for reading this story!! it's the longest thing i've ever written which was very daunting at times but those of you who left comments or other feedback really helped me to stay motivated and i cant say enough how much i appreciate it ❤️

i was most uncertain about the ending of this fic and it went through a lot of different variations of how tf these two would figure things out. of course with where i left it off there's more story to come, i didn't feel like these two were in a place where they could fully match up. i considered stretching this fic out through italy and the ideas i have for that arc but i decided to end this fic here to keep the whole falling in love / revealing identity as a contained story and then writing a 2nd part in the future. i am really interested in this version of hannibal since he hasn't been through a lot of the conflict that made him truly scared to lose will and maybe even a little docile under the power he perceives will to have. i think there's a good chance he'd continue to be a manipulative and gaslighting terror (maybe even worse without the fear that will might turn him into the FBI now) and i think there's so much fun potential in that lol. nonetheless i really hope this fic and the spot that their relationship is in is satisfying enough on its own! i don't have a schedule for the 2nd part yet and will take a break from writing this universe for a little while, but i do know that 2nd part will be shorter (unless i inevitably keep on writing until it's a monster) (no this fic wasn't supposed to be anywhere close to 100k lol)

anyway once again thank you all so much for reading, i am going to miss posting these chapters every week ;_;❤️

tumblr link if anyone wants! https://www.tumblr.com/blog/view/will-gayham/691065937223385088?source=share

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